

Provoking Violence? Lessons from Dr. King and the Little Rock Nine

Speech given by Mark Vandermaas on May 24, 2009 at the Flag Raising Event in Caledonia

Why is it so important for us to insist that we be allowed to place a Canadian flag in a place where the OPP do not want it? Are we provoking violence? Are we wrong to oppose the OPP position that we take our protests elsewhere?

In 1954 the US Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional. Despite this decision, in 1957 Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called in the state's National Guard to stop 9 black students from attending Little Rock Central High. His excuse for ignoring the Supreme Court? He was preventing potential violence threatened by white segregationists. His real reason was to make himself politically popular by appeasing racist voters who supported segregation.

President Eisenhower warned the governor to respect the Supreme Court. His Attorney General obtained an injunction ordering Arkansas to stand down the National Guard.

When whites started rioting the Mayor of Little Rock asked Eisenhower to send federal troops. Eisenhower put the Arkansas National Guard under federal control so they could not be misused by the governor, and on Sept 25, 1957 the 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. Army escorted the students into the school. They eventually became known as the Little Rock Nine.

A brave Mayor and a wise President stood up to racists threatening violence against people who wanted only to exercise their constitutional rights. Yet, fifty years later the premier of Ontario has emulated Arkansas' racist governor by allowing the OPP to stop non-native Canadians from quietly walking down a road and peacefully raising a Canadian flag – a right protected by the Supreme Court of Canada in *Ramsden v. Peterborough*.

So far the OPP have arrested 3 people for the 'offence' of raising a Canadian flag in Caledonia. When I complained to the Ontario Human Rights Commission about my arrest, this is what Julian Fantino's lawyer told them:

"Mr. Vandermaas' actions in relation to the situation at Caledonia have made him a potential target of the more extreme element who do not share his views. It was the Respondents' honestly held belief that the placement of the flag could provoke others to breach the peace and put Mr. Vandermaas and others in harms way."

It is downright frightening that Ontario's police force believes it has the right to arrest innocent victims instead of those making the threats.

The media seem to have bought into the OPP's anti-democratic logic. They constantly ask, "Aren't you provoking violence by putting up the flag across from Douglas Creek Estates?"

First, it was the OPP who decided where we should put up flags when they arrested Caledonia resident Bo Chausse on December 02, 2006 for daring to exercise his rights on that very location.

Second, the question of provoking violence during the exercise of one's rights was answered decisively 46 years ago on April 16, 1963 by Dr. King in a letter he wrote from the Birmingham jail in response to critics who suggested that he was provoking violence by marching where black people were not wanted.

"In your statement you assert that our actions, **even though peaceful**, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. **But is this a logical assertion?** Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? We must come to see that, as the federal courts have consistently affirmed, it is wrong to urge an individual to cease his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest may precipitate violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber."

If the OPP were arresting black or native people because white racists had threatened to harm them, not a single journalist would even think to ask the non-white protesters if they thought they were provoking violence by protesting against racist policing practices. Reporters would be hounding the Premier and the Commissioner of the OPP for answers, and issuing strongly-worded editorials demanding an end to outrageous violations of civil rights that can never be tolerated in a democracy.

As Gary McHale said in his last column in the Regional News:

"The Charter of Rights must be more than a piece of paper with mere words on it. The Rights and Freedoms of every citizen are not subject to the whims of the Commissioner nor 'extreme elements' on Six Nations. Violent groups cannot be allowed to control the police to the point where people's rights are denied in the name of appeasement.

When and where does it stop if the OPP are allowed to strip you of your Rights out of fear of the criminals who choose to use violence to force their political will upon others?"

Unlike the Little Rock Nine, we can expect no help from our federal government to protect us from McGuinty's OPP National Guard and the threats from native extremists. There will be no heroic call for intervention by the Mayor of Haldimand County. No return calls from the Canadian Civil Liberties Association. No spirited defence of our rights from Canada's so-called mainstream media.

Why? Because – we were born with the wrong colour of skin, and the doctrine of politically-correct racism demands that those with the 'correct' skin colour must be appeased no matter the cost.

For now, ordinary citizens must carry the burden of the fight for our rights with no help from those who should be most vigilant in protecting them. We must conduct this struggle with the same perseverance and dignity displayed by those in whose footsteps we follow. Today, when we confront the injustices of racial policing in Caledonia, we must not respond with angry words or violence even if we are badly provoked by those opposed to us.

Give the police officers space so they do not feel threatened. If they decide to arrest your neighbour, no matter how unjust it may be, allow them to do so peacefully. Show them, once again, that we are not the enemy; their real enemies are those in the OPP command who give them illegal orders designed to fulfill the whims of violent racists.

Even when violence was brought against him and his followers, including the murder of 4 children in a KKK church bombing Dr. King did not abandon his determination to confront injustices. Those who suggest we should raise our flags 'somewhere else' because native racists may be provoked to violence are on the wrong side of history, just as the well-meaning critics of Dr. King were wrong nearly 50 years ago.

The United States has a black president today because ordinary people believed that all human beings should be equal under the law. They refused to negotiate their rights away and refused to surrender to the concept of racial domination. History proves that a committed few can arouse the conscience of a nation and change its destiny with peaceful means. Those of you who march with us today are part of the few that can change what is happening in Ontario, and I thank you for being part of that change.