

Leave two-hatters alone

There will be more uneasy days ahead for a group of local volunteer firefighters as they await a decision on whether their full-time jobs are in jeopardy for violating an unfair and outdated union oath to not serve as volunteer firefighters in their home communities.

These men and women bring a wealth of experience to many towns predominantly volunteer firefighting force. And it could all be lost if unions get their way and volunteers disappear simply out of fear of being targeted. It's already happening here.

Think for a minute about the wealth of training and experience that could be lost locally if the Brampton Professional Fire Fighting Union gets its way and a tribunal finds the five volunteer firefighters guilty for violating an International Association of Fire Fighters oath.

This fight began with seven local volunteers facing charges. Two resigned from their positions as volunteers. We're down to five (believed to be just some of many who are two-hatting) now facing hefty fines and possible loss of their full time gigs if they continue serving as volunteers during their personal time off.

Put yourself in their shoes. What would you do if your employer told you what you could and could not do when you clocked out at 5 p.m.? Would you stand up and fight back?

Firefighters work around the clock shifts offering fire protection for communities. In their time off, many work part-time jobs in a variety of positions. Moonlighting as volunteers while earning an honorarium is not only one way of keeping their skills sharp, but giving back to their communities is also what personally fuels these individuals.

This is the biggest fight these men and women have faced in their careers. You can't blame them for being nervous about the outcome as they've already watched four of their peers in Mississauga be found guilty and fined for volunteering in their home community of Halton Hills. The difference is that the Halton Hills volunteers did not have the support or financial backing of the town. Caledon does. And the town is prepared to go the distance and fight the unfair targeting of its two-hatters who provide an invaluable service to the community.

While targeting of two-hatters across the province isn't anything new, Bill 109 is a relatively new piece of legislation introduced in 2015 as a way of protecting two-hatters from being targeted by unions.

Different interpretation of the bill has appeared to cause confusion and has continued to pit two-hatters and unions against one another. So maybe it's time for the province to step in front of the flames and stamp them out by giving Bill 109 the teeth it needs.

The Independent & Free Press

The Independent & Free Press is published Thursday and is one of several Metroland Media Group Ltd. community newspapers. Editorial and advertising content of The Independent & Free Press is protected by copyright. Unauthorized use is prohibited. The Independent & Free Press is a member of the Ontario Press Council, which is an independent ethical organization established to deal with editorial concerns. For additional information or to file a complaint, contact info@ontpress.com or call 416-340-1981.



Letters to the editor

Critics miss the prayer point

Re: Letter, The Key Word is Public, May 18.

As an acting secondary school principal and now as a retired principal, I have been following the debate regarding religious accommodation in our schools.

One argument that has often been repeated concerns the removal of the Lord's Prayer from the public school system and how that compares with granting religious groups accommodations in schools today. The Lord's Prayer was removed, almost 30 years ago, because of a Charter of Rights decision in favour of a group of people (religious and non-religious) who argued that sitting in the hall during recitations was against their Charter Rights. Many people, including Ms. Hutcheson, go on in their argument to state, Muslims given the special privilege of praying their prayers. This is the back end of the argument which states, essentially: How dare the Muslims have the Lord's Prayer removed and then get to say their own.

The Muslim prayers are not forced upon a whole school system. They are

voluntary, including only those who choose to attend. In a quiet room. Away from anybody else. They certainly do not expose their fellow students to what may be offensive to them. Why are so many people afraid of a group of students exercising their rights within the laws of Ontario? What appears to be lost in their argument is that accommodations go across virtually all faith groups, not only Muslims. In addition, accommodations include a wide variety of factors, such as:

- Observation of major holy days, ceremonies, commemorations, and celebrations;
- School opening and closing exercises;
- Prayer/rituals;
- Dietary requirements;
- Fasting;
- Religious attire;
- Scheduling for religious leaves;
- Participation in daily activities and curriculum.

Ms. Hutcheson also states, "...all, under a public system, must be treated impartially with no special privileges for any one group. I would like to point out the Education Act, which states, very plainly, Equity does not mean treating

people the same without regard for individual differences.

One of the beautiful things about our education system in particular and our Canadian society in general, is that we are accommodating. We celebrate differences. We grow as individuals and as a society because of these differences.

I have been in major cities all over the world. What I see here, where we live, is the best example the world has to offer of a society that says, "Come here. Join us. Share with us."

There are people who say, "Don't Come, or Go Home, to those who want to join us in this incredible country. They fail to see that so many people from around the world come here precisely because we are open and accommodating. They are leaving oppression and intolerance and violence. We grow because of what they bring.

Ontario's Education Act states: *Ontario is home to people from over 200 countries who speak more than 130 languages, including English and French. We believe that Ontario's diversity is one of its greatest assets both today and for the future.*