

## Equal Rights Association formed in Orangeville, vows to fight Bill 41

By Constance Scrafield

This is about one set of laws for many and another for a few. This is about equal rights within the single society. The details of the issue cannot be allowed to cloud the core issue.

In October, 2018, the Ford government passed a law, Bill 41, granting the Sikh community an exemption from wearing helmets while riding a motorcycle. Religious freedom was cited as the reason for the exemption.

Like seat belts, laws were passed in Ontario that helmets must be worn as a safety factor. All the evidence from doctors and scientists pointed to the benefits of wearing helmets. Although there was push-back from some motorcyclists, about freedom to do as they pleased with regard to their own safety, the law was passed and lives have been saved.

It took a few months for reaction to the passing of Bill 41 to really set in and the imbalance of it began to rankle. First of all, perhaps, there was concern that the safety issue for the Sikh community was not being appropriately guarded, that the whole purpose of wearing helmets had been put to one side.

The campaign for the exemption for the Sikhs has been waged since 2016. At the base is the turban, the five yards of cloth that goes into making the headgear, which every baptized Sikh man is obliged to wear.

Whether it is possible ? or desirable ? for the Sikh community to redesign their turbans to accommodate the safety of a helmet or whether it is possible to design a helmet that can accommodate a turban have not been explored.

Ross Hutchings, Jeffrey Halsall, Bruce Brethour and Roger de Brum, the four founding members of the Equal Rights Association (ERA), incorporated the organization as a not-for-profit as soon as was possible and the ERA is less than two months old, having been established on December 18, 2018.

They have chosen this issue of the helmet exemption as their first campaign. In response, their membership took off and now numbers just under 1,200. They have a very strong online presence.

This is severely groomed every day to be sure that contributors stay on track, with no ? even the tiniest ? hint of prejudice or anything the slightest bit off-colour.

?It's really important to get this right,? said Mr. Hutchings. ?Anything that detracts from the main point can throw the whole thing off.?

Additionally, Ross Hutchings is emphatic: ?I don't care,? said he, ?how it turns out. It's not about helmets, it's about one law for some and a different law for others. It's against the Constitution that says we all live under the same law.?

He continued, ?Whether the Ford government takes back the exemption or gets rid the helmet law altogether, I don't care; what I do care about is that the law applies to all of us the same.?

If mothers and doctors are concerned at the idea of the helmet law being scrapped in order to bring balance back to the structure of the law, then Mr. Hutchings hopes they will also join the cause and present their own arguments.

?The problem with Canadians,? were his concerns, ?is they don't stand up for themselves. They let our laws be pushed around and then, they stand around in their kitchens and complain. I'm tired of doing that and I wanted this imbalance to be fixed.?

Like all concessions made to promote religious inclusion in this fine country, the details can get muddied and feelings can run high. Ross Hutchings wants to keep it simple.

He theorized, "Doug Ford should have suggested the Sikhs find a way to redesign their turbans to fit into legally suitable headgear in order to ride a motorcycle. There are plenty of different types of vehicles; no one has to ride a motorcycle and, if they want to, the law dictated helmets are required. For everybody, until recently."

He wanted to be clear: "We certainly don't have an argument with the Sikhs. We have an argument with the government about our equal rights. And we're going push until it's done."

The Citizen reached out the Sikh Motorcycle Club of Ontario to ask about how they felt about this initiative and they had no comment.