

Municipal governance shouldn't be moral theater

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"This was obviously not the day to be voting on collective bargaining agreements and raises for the folks that were responsible for the death of Elijah McClain."



So declared Aurora Councilwoman Alison Coombs during discussion of the city's police and fire collective bargaining agreements.

It was a remarkable sentence, chiefly because almost none of it described what the council was actually doing.

The council was not voting on Elijah McClain. It was not deciding who was responsible for his death. It was not awarding bonuses to the officers involved in the 2019 incident.

It was voting on negotiated labor agreements for current police and fire employees.

No matter.

With one sentence, a routine act of municipal governance was transformed into moral theater.

Welcome back to the Aurora City Council Theatre of the Absurd, where increasingly little is allowed to remain merely what it is.

A labor agreement cannot simply be a labor agreement.

Everything must first be fitted into the grand production: oppression, resistance, victimhood, guilt, historical reckoning and, of course, the obligatory demand that everyone choose a side.

The chamber once existed for the relatively mundane business of governing a city. Citizens petitioned their representatives. Staff explained contracts and budgets. Council members argued. Votes were taken.

It was not always exciting. That was rather the point. Government is supposed to be less theatrical than television.

Aurora appears determined to reverse the arrangement. Increasingly, the council chamber functions as a stage, public comment as performance space and controversy as content.

The real audience may not even be sitting in the room. It is online. It is on social media. It is waiting for the clipped video, the outraged caption, the righteous denunciation and the next act.

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A city cannot govern effectively if every labor agreement, zoning decision, police policy, budget amendment and parliamentary motion must first audition for a supporting role in America's 400-year moral drama.

Every production, naturally, requires a cast. There is The Victim, whose suffering supplies the moral authority. There is The Advocate, who explains what that suffering means politically and what everyone else is required to conclude from it. There is The Agitator, whose function is to create confrontation. There is The Performer, who understands that four dramatic minutes at a microphone are worth infinitely more than 40 minutes of dull policy discussion. There is The Chorus, returning meeting after meeting to reinforce the approved narrative.

And then there is The Institutional Ally. This is the critical character. The Institutional Ally takes the language of protest from the public microphone and carries it onto the dais, where accusation acquires the aura of official legitimacy.

But the production also features characters who never need to enter the room. Call them The Historical Witnesses. Slavery. Jim Crow. Segregation. Civil-rights abuses. Elijah McClain. Jor'Dell Richardson. Kilyn Lewis.

Each can be summoned into a current debate to establish an uninterrupted moral continuum between past injustice and whatever dispute happens to be before the council tonight.

History matters. Historical injustice matters. But history is supposed to provide context. It is not supposed to replace evidence. That distinction is increasingly lost.

Once every modern disagreement becomes another scene in a centuries-old morality play, the particular facts become almost inconvenient.

The question ceases to be: What happened here? It becomes: Which side of history are you on? That is a much easier question because it eliminates the tiresome necessity of proving the accusation.

The script then runs with remarkable efficiency. A grievance produces an accusation. The accusation produces a demand. Resistance to the demand becomes evidence that the institution refuses to listen. Enforcing meeting rules becomes "silencing." Refusing to respond becomes indifference. Responding becomes hostility.

An investigation supporting the allegation proves the activists correct. An investigation rejecting it proves the institution corrupt. It is an extraordinarily durable worldview.

Which brings us back to Coombs. Her sentence performed a neat little feat of moral bookkeeping. Responsibility for a specific death was transferred from specific individuals to an entire institution. Responsibility belonging to the institution was then transferred to everyone currently working within it.

And suddenly current police officers and firefighters became "the folks that were responsible for the death of Elijah McClain."

This raises several questions. Does an Aurora police officer hired in 2025 inherit responsibility for something that occurred in 2019? Does a newly hired dispatcher? Does a firefighter? A records clerk? At what point does institutional guilt expire?

And if guilt attaches by employment category, perhaps Human Resources should start printing moral liability disclosures with the onboarding packet.

Collective guilt is wonderfully efficient. It saves everyone from the tedious work of establishing individual responsibility. Membership will do.

And here is where the theater stops being merely ridiculous and becomes dangerous.^{Note} The problem is not that activists protest. They should.

The problem begins when elected government adopts the theatrical premises of the protest.

Then symbolism outranks substance. A city cannot govern effectively if every labor agreement, zoning decision, police policy, budget amendment and parliamentary motion must first audition for a supporting role in America's 400-year moral drama.

At some point, government has to return to the boring business of government. Eventually someone has to turn on the lights, sweep the stage, read the agenda and govern the city that actually exists.

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