

Q&A ANDREA MROZEK

Wedded to marriage – at least in principle

TRALEE PEARCE

Last month, the conservative British Columbia-based Canadian think tank, Focus on the Family, quietly promoted 36-year-old Andrea Mrozek to the post of executive director of its Ottawa research arm, the Institute of Marriage and Family.

Mrozek is no newbie to contentious issues – from abortion to universal child care. (She has worked as the group's lead researcher and spokesperson since 2006.)

But now, she's poised to become a pundit to reckon with, one with arguably more reach than, to use Tina Fey's phrase, the "grey-faced men," who often speak their minds. Case in point: While the Conservative caucus is mired in a battle over one corner of the abortion debate – whether to openly condemn the abortion of female fetuses – Mrozek has happily stepped into the fray in full support of the motion to condemn the practice.

The Globe spoke to her from her office in Ottawa.

What is the Institute's big-picture message? Should we be trying to preserve marriage and family?

We do defend marriage as an institution that bolsters and supports civil society. We use the best possible research to show why marriage is important. A long-term goal of mine would be to examine in the Canadian context more closely the nature of marriage as a poverty fighter and looking at the higher rates of living in poverty when marriage declines. That's something we've seen established more solidly in the United States, but in Canada that research hasn't been done.

Isn't it a chicken-and-egg scenario, though? Which came first, the marriage breakdown or the poverty? Don't people who start with less education and less money tend to marry less?

Having that conversation about the chicken and the egg could advance our understanding of poverty and marriage. I was just talking with somebody about no-fault divorce recently and when it was brought in, it was thought to be a positive development, freeing for people experiencing abuse in marriages, for example. At this point, we've seen negative implications as well. For example, anyone can take off at a moment's notice and leave you high and dry. Two sides of the coin. When the government allowed for no-fault divorce, it was apparent that many people took advantage of it. So did the government break down marriage or was marriage already broken and people jumped on that opportunity to divorce? To me, those questions are really interesting.



Mrozek on being unmarried: 'Doesn't that allow me to advocate for the institution from an unbiased, neutral standpoint?' DAVE CHAN FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

You're not saying people on the poverty line should stick it out in a bad marriage?

This is not about high-conflict or abusive marriages. Divorce can be the best possible solution in some circumstances; nobody's going to claim otherwise, least of all me. Marital demise happens in many different ways and I feel sympathy and empathy toward that. But we're talking about the non-abusive and non-high-conflict divorce. Last I looked at those numbers, the vast majority of divorces fall into the low-conflict category.

You still risk sounding judgmental, suggesting that people in those low-conflict divorces could have tried a little harder to stay together.

The part of my job I don't enjoy is we're commenting so often on the most deeply personal moments in people's lives. We're talking about statistics in the aggregate and a long-term climate in which we want to make it easier and happier – not like trapped in your sad, unhappy marriage – in a long-term and society-trending kind of way, easier to have the stability that comes with a good marriage. Understanding that nobody ever got married with plans for divorce. About 30 per cent of people marrying today will divorce before their 30th anniversary.

Are you married?

I'm actually not married.

Of all the people who might feel pressure to get married ... do you?

I don't. And I never have. My parents gave up long ago. But I tell people – doesn't that allow me to advocate for the institution from an unbiased, neutral standpoint? I have all my jokes lined up – like when I joined the Institute I thought it was a dating site.

What about same-sex marriage?

We don't have an official stance or statement. We have stood up in favour of man-woman research showing children fare best when raised by their own biological parents. We would be cautious about sanctioning same-sex marriage – it's obviously legal in Canada – for wondering what the outcomes for children are. At this point we have less than 1 per cent of children being raised in same-sex couples, so again we're looking at marriage as a stabilizing force and for a majority of families that's not going to involve same-sex marriage.

And what about universal childcare?

The daycare issue takes on many different faces for me. One is whether it's good, educational or beneficial for children or not. The other is can we afford it. Should we do it versus can we do it? And do parents want to do it? A survey we did on parent preferences found that upward of 70 per cent of parents would prefer to have a parent at home. Their next choice was a family member. The kind of care covered by a federal or provincial plan was their last choice. So we have advocated for money to go to parents to be able to spend as they choose. To us, that empowers parents. There's a push on the educational side of early learning. The sales pitch done by government for early learning is not always true.

Isn't it true for kids from low-income families or at-risk kids?

Yes it is. That we're not opposing. We're generally standing up against the universal. At that point, it makes it into an additional benefit for the people who least need it.

Your personal project is a website called prowomenprolife.org. Does the Institute wade into the abortion debate?

Not really. ... Where we believe that it contributes, when you look at the changing demographics, we believe that the abortion rate is something you can mention in that context. Prowomenprolife had always been my personal website and I don't see that figuring into the Institute's upcoming studies in a prominent way.

Have you been pro-life for a long time?

It somehow crystallized for me that the notions I'd been presented around women's rights and abortion being a choice that that was false. It is a choice but it's not a good choice and to put it in those light, airy terms does a disservice to those women who have suffered in their abortions, it does a disservice to what happens to the unborn. I did engage in it with great trepidation I should add; nobody wants to be painted as something they're not. I felt a sense of worry that people wouldn't see the heart behind it.

Would you consider getting into politics?

I enjoy being outside of that. I'm opinionated and I don't ever want to have a caucus telling me what I can and can't say.

This interview has been condensed and edited.