



Not Over Yet: The same-sex marriage campaign welds Canadian social conservatives into a permanent political force

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Be careful what you wish for--that may be the lesson Canada's social progressives learn from their campaign to entrench same-sex marriage in Canadian law. For while gay marriage advocates have certainly achieved their goal of legally validating same-sex unions--an achievement grudgingly acknowledged even by opponents--their initiative has had the unintended consequence of galvanizing social conservative forces throughout Canada.

Canadian so-cons worked together in unprecedented fashion in late October to push for a thorough evaluation of the impact of same-sex marriage. And it was evident from their organization and sophistication that they are now a force that will be felt far beyond the current marriage debate. "I see the co-operation that has taken place between various groups--various faiths, various religions, and various individuals that have no interest whatsoever in religion--as having long-term merit," says former Reform and Canadian Alliance MP Grant Hill, now with a group called Restore Marriage Canada. "There have been bridges crossed that haven't been crossed before. There has been some co-operation that hasn't taken place before. People have gotten to know one another, and there are networks now that I think will bear political fruit for the future."

The political importance of the same-sex marriage debate was already evident in January's general election. After the Liberal government passed the Civil Marriage Act (Bill C-38) in 2005, then Opposition leader Stephen Harper promised that a Conservative government would introduce a motion in the House of Commons, asking MPs whether the law should be reviewed. That pledge appeared to be at least partially responsible for a sharp rise in Tory support among church-going Christians. According to Ipsos-Reid pollsters, the January election saw, for the first time ever, more observant Catholics in English Canada voting for the Tories than for the Grits.

"I was shocked when I saw the data," said pollster Andrew Grenville.

Once elected, Harper restated his intention to put the issue before the House, without specifying when. A source in the Prime Minister's Office now confirms the controversial motion will be tabled sometime before Christmas. As things stand, the review is unlikely to be approved by a House in which the Conservatives have only a minority--although at press time a new COMPAS poll showed 64 per cent of Canadians in favour of MP's revisiting the law.

Still, the gay advocacy group Canadians for Equal Marriage said in a news release, "We believe we'll win this vote, and put an end to the threat that now hangs over lesbian, gay, bi and trans people and all Canadians who believe in equality." The group estimates that more than 10,000 same-sex marriages have been performed in Canada since 2003.

Nevertheless, a broad coalition of conservative lobbyists and think-tanks is attempting to persuade politicians to give the law a second look. Their "Defend Marriage" campaign took centre stage in Ottawa, Oct. 24, when about 100 religious and community leaders descended on Parliament Hill to twist arms and bend ears. They didn't try to persuade MPs to overturn C-38 directly; rather, they stressed the need to examine the law's social and legal implications. "We're just asking for MPs to do what they do as a matter of normal business; and that is to review legislation and policy in order to determine its impact, both positive and negative, and to make whatever adjustments they deem necessary," says Joseph Ben-Ami, executive director of the Institute for Canadian Values.

This new emphasis on the "public good" is a strategic move, designed to move the focus from the rights of homosexuals, and onto the possibly adverse consequences that same-sex marriage may have on society--an issue Parliament never addressed. The weightiest exhibit in the so-con prosecution is the 453-page report of a French National Assembly commission, tabled last January, which concluded that exclusive male-female marriage must be preserved to protect the rights of children. The 30-member, multi-party commission insisted that, "children, confronted with mutations in family models, be fully taken into account and not suffer from situations imposed upon them by adults." The French report (available at www.lifesite.net) concluded: "The interest of the child must take precedence over adults' exercise of their freedom . . . including parents' lifestyle choices."

The Canadian so-con strategy has been apparent for months. In May, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (a think-tank associated with Focus on the Family Canada) released a report warning, in part, of the unpredictable negative impacts on children of legalized same-sex marriage and being raised by same-sex couples. More directly, Ben-Ami's organization released a paper as part of the late-October PR blitz, arguing that Parliament itself had neglected to properly deliberate the impact of the law on the public good--children and parents, on marriage commissioners who might have moral objections to performing same-sex marriages, and on the fundamental institution of marriage itself.

Such arguments have a dual purpose: not only do they support the drive to re-evaluate the marriage law, but they also add impetus to a bill, the Defence of Religions Act, that the Tories were rumoured to be considering, should the re-evaluation motion fail. According to newspaper reports, the "DORA" legislation would be designed to protect the free speech and religious rights of clergy and others who might dissent from the public normalization of homosexual activity.

Brian Rushfeldt, executive director of the Canada Family Action Coalition and a Defend Marriage participant, says it's important that any such law protect all Canadians, not just those whose opposition to homosexual behaviour is based on religious beliefs. First, though, he's hopeful MPs will revisit the bill itself. "I think there's been a shift with parliamentarians, away from the belief that this is a done deal," he says, "to where some of the members of Parliament are now starting to think and suggest that maybe there are issues that maybe have not been dealt with or were not dealt with properly."

Many groups have come together to oppose the law--more than a dozen organizations with tens of thousands of members--and have been strengthened by the effort made so far. David Quist, executive director of the Institute for Marriage and Family Canada, agrees the same-sex marriage debate has galvanized social conservative and religious groups. The impact, he says, will be felt in the coming months and years as issues such as euthanasia and palliative care are discussed. Also on the horizon are such controversial issues as stem cell research and (perennially) abortion. So-cons may yet lose the same-sex battle, but they now stand better prepared to wage a broader war.

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