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Making marriage matter: A 2010 New Year's resolution

It's time for Canadians to agree that marriage matters

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In a year when the marriage-related news has been negative—think Tiger Woods and the kerfuffle over whether streetcars in Toronto would run ads for a cheating website, it's hard to keep perspective. Yet precisely because of news items like these, as the New Year arrives, Canadians might consider making 2010 a year in which to prioritize marriage—their own and also as an important societal institution.

South of the border, both Democrats and Republicans see the consensus in the social science research showing that marriage matters for kids and adults alike. In Canada, we need to begin the discussion by resolving any remaining debate over whether strong marriages matter. They do. They matter personally and they matter in the public realm for poverty reduction, for our culture and economy. [1]

An American report released this December, produced by a long list of high-calibre scholars gives cause to consider the importance of marriage and a marriage-friendly culture both for families and the nation. In particular, *The state of our unions 2009* examines how finances affect married life and in turn how married life affects finances—both personal finances and those of the economy. [2]

A report focusing on money in marriage makes sense in a time of recession. Indeed, some argue recession can engender greater reliance on a spouse. "Many couples are rediscovering the longstanding sociological truth that marriage is one of society's best social insurance plans," writes lead author and marriage scholar W. Bradford Wilcox. [3] That's a positive takeaway in a recessionary climate for a culture where the importance of marriage has been on the wane for decades.

While there are some positives in the report, in general, the news is not good. The income divide between married and unmarried continues to grow—fewer lower-educated Americans are getting married. More men are losing their jobs in this recession, which could hit marriage too—some research suggests men are happier in their marriages when they work the same amount or more than their wives. [4]

And according to an American index of institutional vitality for marriage, marriage is indeed on the decline. The index measures important factors like the per cent of adults married, the per cent of married persons who are very happy with their marriage, the per cent of first marriages intact and the per cent of births to married parents and combines the scores. In 1970 that number was 76.2. By 2008, it had fallen to 60.3. [5]

In Canada, measuring the institutional vitality of marriage is made very difficult because the proper statistics cannot easily be accessed. A clean data set that separates cohabitation and marriage, for example, and that goes back to the 1970s is a challenging thing to find. Changing this remains an imperative. Charting the trajectory of marriage will be absolutely critical to assessing the future of the institution, which acts as a marker in other arenas like poverty and welfare.

A call to prioritize marriage in 2010 is not a call to Hallmark sloganeering—it's a call to doing the tough but rewarding work that every marriage requires. As such, there are practical things that families can do to help their own marriages and those around them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Institute for American Values lists 101 recommendations—personal, legal, and for public policy—to improve the standing of marriage in society. (The full list is accessible online at http://www.americanvalues.org/pdfs/IAV_Marriage_Index_09_25_09.pdf.) Here are five suggestions for families and communities.[6]

- If your marriage has recovered from serious trouble, consider volunteering in (or starting!) a marriage mentoring program in your community
- Be intentional about talking to your teenagers about marriage
- Encourage young people to see dating within the context of courtship, where courtship is defined as “finding and winning the right person for marriage.”
- Parents, in particular, should encourage their adult children to make the commitment of marriage to the loves of their lives—assuming that the partners are mature and responsible
- Churches should help society understand that public policy should not and cannot maintain “value neutrality” on family matters

The 101 ways to support marriage is too long to include here; many suggestions are geared toward social and fiscal policy too. There are ways in which government can engender strength in marriage without encroaching on our private lives.

Yet in Canada we have to take the very first step. We have to decide—using social science research as our guide—that marriage is important enough to bother trying.

Endnotes

[1] Take for example the two family-friendly scholars of differing politics from the Brookings Institution, who recently co-authored a book called *Creating an Opportunity Society*. They may not agree on what can and should be done to strengthen marriage, but they agree it's important. See Haskins, R., Sawhill, Isabel. (2009). *Creating an opportunity society*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, p. 215.

[2] Wilcox, W. B. (2009, December). *The State of our Unions*. National Marriage Project, University of Virginia and the Institute for American Values. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from <http://www.stateofourunions.org/>

[3] The State of our Unions, press release. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from http://www.stateofourunions.org/2009/pr_2009SOU.pdf

[4] The State of our Unions, p. 19.

[5] Blankenhorn, D. (2009) *The Marriage Index*. Institute for American Values. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from http://www.americanvalues.org/pdfs/IAV_Marriage_Index_09_25_09.pdf

[6] It's interesting to note that there is not agreement on the 101 ideas to support marriage. A footnote reads “These 101 ideas are offered by David Blankenhorn and Linda Malone-Colón, and do not necessarily represent the views of the scholarly contributors to this Marriage Index.” One could take this as evidence of a full debate on the topic of how to support marriage.