



Polygamy bust opens debate

By Andrea Mrozek

January 19, 2009

The arrests of polygamists in Bountiful, B.C. marks the start of an official attempt to prevent and penalize multi-partner marriage.

It's not surprising Canada will debate the legalization of polygamous marriage. What may yet surprise is that those of us opposed to polygamy will most likely lose.

To understand why, have a brief look at how marriage evolved.

From prehistoric times until the late 20th century, marriage was understood as a child-centred institution between one man and one woman, for life.

Though you'd be hard pressed to find this view on any university campus, marriage served to protect women and children, chiefly by obliging men to stick around to help raise them. (Sex was confined to marriage so any resulting children were identifiably linked to both parents--finally both men and women were held responsible.)

Today, marriage is chiefly based on love and weddings are an opportunity to have a party. We (well, the Supreme Court) already agreed marriage should not be limited by sexual orientation.

What justification is there now to limit the number of partners?

We already collectively accepted it needn't be for life and it needn't be between members of the opposite sex. If you are against polygamy, but in favour of same sex marriage, you're between a rock and a hard place.

It looks like hypocrisy to extend marriage to everyone -- everyone except, polygamists and say, polyamorists.

JUST ANOTHER TREND

Polyamory is another trend in collective relationships -- and just one more good reason why polygamy ought not be legal. Creative marriage arrangements involving any number of "parents" amount to experimentation on kids.

Kids do best raised by their mom and dad -- not dad and two or three moms.

Of course, many Canadians are simply uninterested in social issues. But smart social policy -- a numbers limitation on marriage -- should also be of interest to the fiscally minded.

How much will parental leave cost if it involves 25 wives and 100 children? Divorce court? "Bogged down" won't be words big strong to describe the mess.

So what can be done? We don't want to revert to the days when harsh stigma was attached to kids born out of wedlock. And yet, legalized polygamy is another strain we just don't need: It hurts women, children and families.

We need to speak with a powerful, unified voice against it, even if that means unusual alliances. Those who advocated for gay marriage often said it would not lead to legalized polygamy, which they opposed. They, secular atheists and feminists must join hands with the religious faithful and the traditional.

We can all do something -- starting with informing ourselves on what marriage could be.

The pendulum continues to swing. At very least, open and legal polygamy just might jolt us to consider the kind of community in which we want to live. Throwing in the towel is not a solution -- even if victory is far from clear.