

The costs of same-sex marriage

Andrea Mrozek, Published: Thursday, March 26, 2009

There won't likely be repercussions as a result of legalizing same-sex marriage in Canada; same-sex marriage is itself a repercussion -- a result, not a cause. In a recent column, editorial page editor Leonard Stern asserted Americans should not be concerned about the legalization of same-sex marriage because Canada did it four long years ago to no effect. Stern is likely right, but for the wrong reasons.

For one, social change happens over decades. Commenting on the effects of legalizing same-sex marriage four years on is a bit like pondering marriage on the first date -- you may really like the guy, but it's just too early to say.

The divorce revolution, common-law living arrangements and lone parenting are still on the rise in Canada, as marriage rates decline. The sexual revolution had something to do with changes in our social fabric too -- more sex out of wedlock means more children born out of wedlock. Somewhere along this road, the central feature of marriage as a child-friendly institution to keep mom and dad together for stability in child-rearing was left behind. All this took generations, not years.

The fact that many married heterosexual couples are childless should not overturn centuries of marriage as a child-centered institution. Today, public perception is that marriage is almost exclusively about adult love. Without children as a focal point for any marriage, the logic of supporting traditional marriage in general declines. This attitudinal shift happened long before gay marriage emerged on the scene.

Then there's the fact that gay marriages accounted for just 0.1 per cent of all marriages in the 2006 census. This small percentage is unlikely to have any large scale repercussions on society. Too often we assume huge results from a small change.

We also, too often, assume that every new family form is a good one. Living together? Great. Lone parent? More power to you. Reams have been written on the idea of the good divorce -- all of this culminating in a greater acceptance over decades of new family forms, including gay marriage. Social science data is quite clear that the children of married parents fare better than those merely living together, or lone parenting. If marriage is just a piece of paper as so many are fond of saying -- then it's worth more than its weight in platinum. This raises the point that perhaps we've just bestowed those benefits on gay married families. And the results remains to be seen.

We don't know how children will fare when deliberately separated from biological parents, because it's uncharted territory. But when children go on global manhunts for their biological dads, we at least get the inkling that what worked for the parents might not be working for the child.

In fact, there's a bigger historical precedent for polygamous marriages than gay marriage. And Canadians might like to know we aren't even studying these child outcomes. Stern does express some concern over guarding religious freedoms. Those, he argues, haven't been infringed upon in Canada. But it's worth noting that well-meaning religious folks stopped speaking out on issues quite some time ago, and, quite frankly, they'd be well-advised to continue on in silence, if the public trials by human rights tribunal or moralistic media finger wagging are any indication.

The underlying message in Stern's column is that those who oppose same sex marriage -- Californian or Canadian -- are dinosaurs; poorly-informed and uneducated, dinosaurs who don't know the difference between a chardonnay and a sauvignon blanc and are bad at cocktail party chit-chat, too. Every time someone stands up to support traditional marriage, she is painted as a modern-day racist. You don't need to imagine how this takes a small bite out of free speech.

Canadian courts brought in same-sex marriage in Canada. Parliament rushed to stamp a seal of approval without any meaningful dialogue in the public square. Californian courts attempted to follow this model -- but too many Californian dinosaurs wouldn't buy it. That takes chutzpah -- and money (the pro-gay marriage and pro-heterosexual marriage campaigns spent a total of about \$45 million). But a fair battle was fought, and silence did not reign.

In Canada, post-legalization of gay marriage, the sky has not fallen. And things are today much the same as they were four years ago. Courts will continue to decide contentious issues away from the public, politicians will continue to hide from them, and well-meaning citizens will walk away. It's all just as it was before. And it's precisely on that point that we as Canadians should be concerned.

Repercussions to gay marriage? We're so over it, we don't even care to ask the right questions.