

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

Marriage is better for everyone, not just French presidents

Published February 10, 2014

By Andrea Mrozek and Philip Cross

Nobody batted an eye when François Hollande became the first president of France to be in a common law relationship rather than a formal marriage. After all, one is an exact substitute for the other is the trendy thinking among worldly adults, n'est-ce pas? Yet, Mr. Hollande's recent announcement – "I wish to make it known that I have ended my communal life with Julie Trierweiler" – shows a fundamental difference between a real marriage and a common law union.

The Hollande-Trierweiler partnership ended a little over a week after it was revealed he was having an affair. The speed with which the split happened shows one of the pitfalls of a common law union compared with marriage. After all, Mr. Hollande is not the first world leader to have an affair. Recall Bill Clinton's tawdry fling with Monica Lewinsky when he was president of the United States. While straining his relationship with first lady Hillary Clinton – he was red faced not only from embarrassment, according to White House staff – it is noteworthy that their marriage survived and indeed seems stronger today. Faced with a similar crisis as Mr. Hollande and Mr. Trierweiler, the Clinton union did not rupture in a matter of days.

This is because ending marriage vows is inherently different than for a common law union. There is more likely to be discussion and attempts at reconciliation after a couple has publicly committed to their relationship surrounded by 'custom and ceremony' in the words of W.B. Yeats. In common law unions, it is too easy for someone to bail-out at the first sign of trouble, without exploring all or even any solutions.

Meanwhile, President Hollande changes partners with the empathy of a hockey coach trimming down his roster. Apparently, ending relationships for him is only marginally more complicated and time-consuming than the old Arabic tradition of saying "I divorce you" three times, and poof, the marriage was dissolved.

Our society should make couples think twice about ending relationships, and not only when children are involved. Separation deprives each spouse of social, emotional and financial support, and has negative implications for personal health, societal stability and even economic growth.

No-fault divorce has weakened 'the ties that bind' by allowing one partner to end a relationship at any time, for any reason. It is often referred to as unilateral divorce, insofar as one party to the marriage gets no say when the other walks out the door. Despite this inequality, research shows that married couples are still less likely to separate than common law partners.

This returns to the fundamental argument of some that common law unions and marriages are perfect substitutes for each other. Our court system now treats them as such in every province but Quebec. However, this equivalence only holds for perfectly rational human beings, which is another way of saying it doesn't actually hold at all. Expecting people in the throes of a marital crisis to coolly step back and rationally examine the situation is asking the impossible. It demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of what it means to be human. As Ms. Trierweiler said when Mr. Hollande confirmed his long-rumoured affair, it was like she "was falling from a skyscraper" and was so upsetting she had to enter hospital.

We have cooling off periods in our society for mundane things like purchases of a home or a big-ticket durable good. Marriage usually is a de facto way of having a cooling off period before imposing the costs that divorce inflicts on the two individuals involved, their families, their employers and our society generally. Common law couples have no such cooling off period – but it's likely at least one of the partners is nonetheless entertaining the hope of permanency. Almost all of us have idealistic – but not impossible – expectations that our relationships will last forever. To hope so is a natural response to a world full of uncertainty at every turn.

If lifelong love – with all the benefits this brings – is a goal, your best bet is still marriage, not a common law union. Sadly, this is a lesson the French President has yet to learn.

Andrea Mrozek is Executive Director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada; Philip Cross is a Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute