Wedded to marriage – at least in principle

TRALEE PEARCE

Last month, the conservative British Columbia-based Canadian think tank, Focus on the Family, quietly promoted 36-year-old Andrea Mrozek to the post of executive director of its Ottawa research arm, the Institute of Marriage and Family.

Mrozek is no newbie to contentious issues – from abortion to universal child care. (She has worked as the group’s lead researcher and spokesperson since 2006.) But now, she’s poised to become a pundit to reckon with, one with arguably more reach than, to use Tina Fey’s phrase, the “grey-faced men,” who often speak their minds. Case in point: While the Conservative caucus is mired in a battle over whether to openly condemn the abortion of female fetuses – the group’s lead researcher and spokesperson since 2006. Mrozek has happily stepped into the fray in full support of the motion to condemn the practice. The Globe spoke to her from her office in Ottawa.

What is the Institute’s big-picture message? Should we be trying to preserve marriage and family?

We do defend marriage as an institution that bolsters and supports civil society. We use the best possible research to show why marriage is important. A long-term goal of mine would be to examine in the Canadian context more closely the nature of marriage as a poverty fighter and looking at the higher rates of living in poverty when marriage declines. That’s something we’ve seen established more solidly in the United States, but in Canada that research hasn’t been done.

Isn’t it a chicken-and-egg scenario, the Brady Bunch? Which came first, the marriage breakdown or the poverty? Don’t people who start with less education and less money tend to marry less?

Having that conversation about the chicken and the egg could advance our understanding of poverty and marriage. I was just talking with somebody about no-fault divorce recently and when it was brought up, it was thought to be a positive development, freeing for people experiencing abuse in marriages, for example. At this point, we’ve seen negative implications as well. For example, anyone can take off at a moment’s notice and leave you high and dry. Two sides of the coin.

The part of my job I don’t enjoy is commenting so often on the most deeply personal moments in people’s lives. We’re talking about statistics in the aggregate and a long-term climate in which we want to make it easier and happier – not like trapped in your sad, unhappy marriage – in a long-term and society-trending kind of way, easier to have the stability that comes with a good marriage. Understanding that nobody ever got married with plans for divorce. About 30 per cent of people marrying today will divorce before their 30th anniversary.

Are you married?

I’m actually not married.

Of all the people who might feel pressure to get married… do you?

I don’t. And I never have.

What about same-sex marriage? We don’t have an official stance or statement. We have stood up in favour of man-woman research showing children fare best when raised by their own biological parents. We would be cautious about sanctioning same-sex marriage – it’s obviously legal in Canada – for wondering what the outcomes for children are. This is not about high-conflict or abusive marriages. Divorce can be seen established more solidly in the United States, but in Canada that research hasn’t been done.

And what about universal childcare?

The daycare issue takes on many different faces for me. One is whether it’s a good, educational or beneficial for children or not. The other is can we afford it. Should we do it versus can we do it? And do parents want to do it? A survey we did on parent preferences found that upward of 70 per cent of parents would prefer to have a parent at home. Their next choice was a family member. The kind of care covered by a federal or provincial plan was their last choice. We have advocated for money to go to parents to be able to spend as they choose. To us, that empowers parents. There’s a push on the educational side of early learning. The sales pitch done by government for early learning is not always true.

Isn’t it true for kids from low-income families or at-risk kids?

Yes it is. That we’re not opposing. We’re generally standing up against the universal. At that point, it makes it into an additional benefit for the people who least need it.

Your personal project is a website called prwomensprofile.org. Does the Institute wade into the abortion debate?

Not really… Where we believe that it contributes, when you look at the changing demographics, we believe that the abortion rate is not a good choice but it’s not a good choice and to put it in those light, airy terms does a disservice to those women who have suffered in their abortions, it does a disservice to what happens to the unborn. I did engage in it with great trepidation I should add; nobody wants to be painted as something they’re not. I felt a sense of worry that people wouldn’t see the heart behind it.

Would you consider getting into politics?

I enjoy being outside of that. I’m opinionated and I don’t ever want to have a caucus telling me what I can and can’t say.

This interview has been condensed and edited.