

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? An extraordinarily offensive poster

Jordan's Queen Rania knows a thing or two about prejudice.

Jordan, of course, is in the midst of the most unsettled part of the world, yet, thanks partially to her humanitarian advocacy, is home to about 630,000 refugees from Syria alone, about 20 per cent of her country's population.

Last week, she even took her 19-year-old daughter Princess Iman Bint Al Abdullah to share the daily Ramadan sundown meal with refugee children at a camp in Jordan's capital city of Amman.

On the question of prejudice, she recently said, 'We shouldn't judge people through the prism of our own stereotypes.'

Which brings us, alas, to the extraordinarily offensive poster featured in about 150 TTC stations and bus shelters across Toronto, a campaign launched by the City of Toronto and the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants.

It features a young white male telling a young Muslim woman wearing a head scarf to 'Go Back to Where You Came From,' to which she replies, 'Where, North York?'

Amira Elghawaby, spokeswoman for the National Council of Canadian Muslims, said the controversial poster is designed 'to have constant dialogue . . . and force people to rethink their assumptions.'

Well, rethinking her own assumptions would be a good place for Elghawaby to begin, particularly the assumption, implicit in this poster, that white males are bigots, by definition, and Muslims are victims.

No doubt some are. But the vast majority are not. But the main point here is that the same can be said for every segment of our society, whatever their background. Some are racists. Most are not.

Or to quote Margaret Mead on the subject, 'Instead of being presented with stereotypes by age, sex, color, class or religion, children must have the opportunity to learn that within each range, some people are loathsome and some are delightful.'

I have no doubt that some Muslim women ? and other visible minority groups ? have experienced racist taunts in their daily lives.

But I also have no doubt that the vast majority of people they come in contact with on a daily basis do not harbor these views.

Since Confederation itself almost 150 years ago, Canada has been a country built on immigration. It hasn't always been smooth sailing. And we certainly don't have a perfect record on that score.

Yet generations of majority white Anglo-Saxon Canadians have welcomed newcomers to our shores and allowed them to join in the building of one of the world's most hospitable states, certainly far more hospitable to newcomers and/or outsiders than any of the countries the refugees and immigrants have come from.

There is no doubt that recent terrorist activities around the world caused by various Islamic extremist groups have raised the stakes and caused great concern throughout the Western world. But who are the racists here: those who worry about their safety or those who are committed to murdering the infidels ? which includes Muslims who do not subscribe to their radicalism ? solely on the grounds of a radical religious-based doctrine?

A letter to the editor in the Saturday Star from Fidenzio Salvatori of Toronto, pretty well sums up the wrongheadedness of this poster's approach.

'The poster aimed at countering Islamophobia has offended the large majority of Canadians who are tolerant, inclusive and exemplary of a multicultural Canada. Painting the picture of a 'white' prejudiced Canada is not the way to alleviate cultural/religious frictions and misunderstandings.'

'By and large, we are not a racist society: we are the envy of the world when it comes to inclusivity. The poster is confrontational, paints with a broad brush the notion of a largely bigoted 'white' society in Toronto, a city that many consider the most multicultural in the world.'

Why does it happen so often with advocacy groups, that in order to make a partisan point they feel the need to malign others?

How does portraying young white males as bigots contribute to a better understanding of different cultural values? Fact is, it does quite the opposite: it offends people who are being smeared simply on the basis of their color and gender, exactly the sort of thing these human rights advocacy groups claim to be against.

Another thing. If any other group in society besides white males were being portrayed in such an ugly fashion, you can bet the TTC and the City would not allow such depictions in the public arena and the zealots on the various human rights commissions would be channeling the Queen of Hearts from Alice in Wonderland by continually shouting, 'Off with their heads!'

