

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? More than one principle involved

Here we go ? again.

Not to single out a particular culprit here ? because it's so commonplace in today's mainstream journalism ? but a Sunday Star column by Marin Regg Cohn underscores the extraordinary irony of the approach to ?tolerance? by people who consider themselves more enlightened than the teeming masses.

Cohn ? a decent man, and actually a writer I regularly enjoy ? fell victim to the popular notion that tolerance, in essence, means agreeing with his viewpoint and intolerance, by definition, means holding a different view.

Writing about the controversies over Ontario's imposition of a new sex-education curriculum and the current dispute in the federal campaign over the suitability of wearing a face-covering niqab at a citizenship ceremony, the column's front-page headline (which Cohn didn't write, but which accurately reflects view) reads: ?Smear and goading: How Harper lifted the veil on our phobias.? Then, turning to page A6 for the rest of the column, that headline reads: ?Tolerance is a two-way street, though many aren't walking it.?

Especially, it seems, people like Cohn who actually see see ?tolerance? as a one-way avenue into their belief systems.

As you likely know, the courts have ruled in favour of a woman who demands the ?right? to hide her face during her citizenship ceremony, a position that Prime Minister Stephen Harper (and, according to opinion polls, more than 80 percent of Canadians ? including the bulk of Muslims) finds offensive.

On the other hand, both NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair and Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau support the woman's position and, like Cohn, are accusing Harper (and by extension, the vast majority of Canadians) of being racists.

To the extent that polls really do reflect public opinion ? a subject open to debate ? it seems that Harper's position has helped his struggling campaign, while both Mulcair and Trudeau have been hurt by it.

To the ?liberal-minded? out there, that just won't do. So the standard tactic comes into play, i.e.

Here's how Cohn put it. ?Now ... Harper is lifting the veil on the phobias still lurking beneath our vaunted tradition of tolerance. Who knew so many of us could get so hot and bothered about burqas and whipped into such a frenzy about homosexuality and sexuality.?

The argument here, of course, leaves no room for assigning even a hint of credibility to the arguments of those who feel a citizenship ceremony is no place to hide your face and likewise those Ontarians who are concerned about the impact of the new sex-ed curriculum.

Clearly, they're all bigots and should be ashamed of themselves.

And Harper ? villain that he is ? is shamelessly taking advantage of it.

It apparently seems impossible to ?liberals? that somebody can genuinely believe in conservative values and that believing in them does not by definition mean being hateful or bigoted at all.

No room for argument in the perfect world of ?liberalism.? And there's no explanation for these people beyond sheer bigotry and intolerance. Period. End of story.

It sometimes gets lost ? deliberately, one assumes ? that the dispute over the niqab is not about the ability to wear one during your day-to-day lives ? even though, just to be clear, it is strictly a cultural choice and not, as is often claimed, a religious mandate.

Like anything else you wear, there are appropriate and inappropriate places to wear it, and it seems to me ? and to most Canadians ? that covering up at a citizenship ceremony is not an appropriate venue.

What gets up the nose of those who disagree is that by appealing the latest court decision on the niqab, Harper is on the winning side politically. That just won't do, of course. So he must be a bigot.

Cohn writes of the ?principled? stands of the opposition parties on the issue. Indeed.

The flip side, of course, is that Harper, by disagreeing with Mulcair, Trudeau, Cohn, the Toronto Star and the usual suspects, must be ?unprincipled.? The only other option would be to admit that there is more than once principle involved here and both can be legitimate.

Cohn, sadly, sinks one step deeper than most, raising the spectre of the slippery slope, asking if those on the wrong side of the issue will ?next turn their sights on Canada's ultra-orthodox Jews, the Hassidic ... who persist in wearing black hats and silk stockings in public because they believe it an essential tenet of faith...?

That's really stooping low, even for a tolerant ?liberal.?

Cohn knows full well the Hassidic, whatever their beliefs dictate, aren't hiding behind a veil. It's not about what one wears in their daily lives, it's about the propriety of hiding your face during a swearing-in ceremony.

