

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Niqab isn't a religious requirement

Regular readers will know your humble correspondent is, ideologically speaking, right of centre in fiscal and social terms. And so it is, like all people who read and watch the news, there is a tendency to view everything through a personal prism and conclude that your viewpoint gets short shrift. Sometimes this is not true, but other times, alas, it is.

Take the case of the mainstream media coverage of the current debate over whether Muslim activist Zunera Ishaq ? or anybody else ? should be allowed to cover her face while swearing the oath of allegiance to Canada.

You will know, of course, that Prime Minister Stephen Harper has consistently argued that ?it is offensive that someone would hide their identity at the very moment where they are committing to join the Canadian family.?

You will also know that various public opinion polls show the vast majority of Canadians ? 82 per cent in a recently-released poll of 3,000 respondents ? agree with Harper, believing it does not make any sense to hide your face the citizenship ceremony.

On the other hand, two courts ? the Federal Court last February and the Federal Court of Appeal two weeks ago ? ruled that Ishaq should be able to wear her niqab.

In addition, both NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair and Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau argue that Ishaq has every right to wear her niqab ? a complete face-covering some Muslim women wear ? and essentially accuse Harper (and by extension, one assumes, the vast majority of Canadians) of being racist.

Federal Court Justice Keith Boswell said in his earlier decision that, ?To the extent this policy interferes with a citizenship judge's duty to allow candidates for citizenship the greatest possible freedom in the religious solemnization of the solemn affirmation of oath, it is unlawful.?

That argument might work if, in fact, the niqab were a religious requirement. But it is not. It is merely a cultural preference, which makes you wonder what on earth Boswell is talking about.

The recent Court of Appeal ruling in her favour was rushed through in order to give Ishaq to get her citizenship in time to vote in the Oct. 19 election. That court essentially acknowledged it wasn't a religious requirement but was her strong preference and therefore she should be allowed to wear her niqab. Amazing.

In last week's French language election debate ? where Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe joined Harper in supporting the ban on face coverings during the citizenship ceremony (opposition to the niqab is stronger in Quebec than anywhere else in Canada) ? Trudeau accused Harper and Duceppe of sewing fear and division. ?My position is clear. I believe that just as a man cannot impose his will on how a woman dresses, we shouldn't have a state dictating how a woman cannot dress.?

This is a bit rich coming from a guy who decreed ? with no discussion or debate among his elected members ? that anybody running for the Liberals must be pro-life. Period. End of story. Talk about imposing your will.

Nobody argues she can't wear her niqab in her normal day-to-day activities. We're talking here about a citizenship ceremony, for heaven's sake.

Harper argued that, ?Our position for a long time has been that when you join the Canadian family, you should not hide your identity, and that is why we think new citizens should wear the oath with their face uncovered. Mr. Mulcair, I will never tell my young daughter that a woman should cover her face because she is a woman.?

To which Mulcair responded, ?Do not attack the woman. Attack the oppressor if you believe there is oppression.?

Oh please. Ishaq has freely chosen to cover her face, not because she's forced to, or because it's a religious requirement, but because she wants to make a political statement.

Naturally, most of the media ? typically out of step with the general public ? is busy accusing Harper of a)- lacking tolerance (which means he doesn't agree with their view; and b)- as the Tory-hating Toronto Star wrote, ? ... political opportunism ... worse, political opportunism in the middle of an election campaign ... (and) trolling for votes.?

There might be some validity to that if, in fact, Harper suddenly announced his position in the middle of the campaign, but, as everyone knows, he's held that position for years.

Would the Star prefer he flip-flop in mid-campaign? Apparently.

Here's the point: there's an underlying assumption in most Canadian political coverage that Mulcair and Trudeau ? both small ?l? liberals ? actually believe what they're saying. But when it comes to Harper, a dreaded Conservative, well, he clearly can't be trusted. The bias is palpable. And it will get worse as election day nears. Count on it.

