

Children key to marriage debate

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By JAMES WEISGERBER

CANADIAN society is caught up in a major debate about the future of marriage in our country. In a democracy everyone must get involved in this debate since the outcome will affect all of us.

The question is: Should we change the definition of marriage from "a union of one man and one woman to exclusion of all others" to "a union of two persons, to the exclusion of all others?" Obviously, much is at stake.

Important values lie behind each definition and, even though the values are different, we must presume that there is good will on the part of those who espouse them. Those proposing a change in the definition of marriage are concerned about basic human rights and see the present definition of marriage as depriving some people of one such right. Those who wish to retain the present definition, see marriage as a unique institution, created not only as a partnership of love between two people, but a union whose very love enables the couple to bring children into the world -- children whom they raise and educate for the good of the whole society.

Children are brought into the world by a mother and a father. The child's growth and development, its sense of worth and its ability to love and contribute to society depend much on the generosity and self-giving of its father and mother. To help a young child become a mature, responsible member of society is a great gift to that society. It is also a task that requires great sacrifice and generosity on the part of parents. Society must do all in its power to support them in their task.

To equate any other relationship with marriage cannot but make less of its importance. Canada needs to strengthen traditional marriage, not undermine it.

Some 40 years ago, when legislation was being proposed to provide for easier access to divorce, Canadians were told that such a change would affect a small number of people, that marriage would not be much affected. Today almost one in two marriages end in divorce. It has become so common and so easily obtained that, as a society, we are telling our members: "We have no interest in you staying

together." But what of the children? Children are gravely wounded by the divorce of their parents and, if children are hurt, our society is also hurt. We hear the same sort of argument today. We are told that changing the definition of marriage will not affect the traditional role of marriage in our country. Perhaps not in the short term, but, by placing other, different relationships on a par with marriage, this fundamental institution will be seen as less important in the long run. We will all be the poorer, particularly our children.

There is no question about the need for every Canadian to be treated equally. However, to treat relationships or institutions which are fundamentally different as though they were the same can lead only to chaos and confusion. Homosexual persons have the same dignity, value and rights as anyone else in our country -- there can be no argument about this. But the real question is this: How can two people of the same gender enter into marriage, which is our privileged institution for begetting and rearing children?

We are told that churches will not be obliged to perform same-sex marriages, and therefore should be excluded from public discussion. Churches are not trying to force their particular morality on the country. The future of our society is clearly something which affects everyone, and so everyone and every institution not only can, but should, contribute to the debate.

In a strong democracy all points of view should be welcome. Our elected leaders should listen carefully to the different voices, and then decide in conscience what is best for the society. Excluding voices because we don't agree with them is not worthy of democratic society. Nor is democracy served by obliging members of Parliament to vote with the leader of the party.

In the next few months we will write an important chapter in the history of our country. The decision about the meaning of marriage will powerfully affect the kind of society and the kind of people we will be.

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