

OPINION...

BREAKING THE ABORTION DEADLOCK

Now that new abortion legislation is before Parliament, the dynamics of the "issue" have changed. The ball has been thrown into that "great Canadian compromise" court, leaving neither of the two polarized sides jubilant nor with a clear victory, and perhaps rightly so. Elevating the rights of one group over that of another is not justice. The proposed legislation is not meant to be ideal: "We all have to throw a little water into our wine". As disgusting as watered-down wine may be, the proposed law is a maneuver reflecting the political reality of the present situation.

Whatever the outcome, it is quite apparent that no piece of legislation will solve the current dilemma, nor the tragedy of abortion. All, I believe, would acknowledge that abortion is a tragedy, which leaves scars of some sort, if not physical then at least emotional. As such, I would think that at minimum our goal ought to be a drastic reduction, if not an elimination, in the number of abortions. That goal will not be achieved by a law. It might be achieved by seriously redirecting our present moral, socio-economic and spiritual orientation.

The abortion dilemma is in many ways the culmination of many things gone wrong, and as a result tears at the moral fabric of our society. Young people, and especially teens, succumb all too often to the pressure to engage in sexual activities that put them at risk and their futures in jeopardy. To a great extent the media, whether through film, television, magazines or advertising, bear a responsibility. Subtle messages are conveyed that sexual intercourse is instant bliss with no consequences, that using another person for one's own sexual gratification is acceptable, and that women enjoy being forced into sexual submission. Asserting the right to freedom of expression has placed us in the quandary of having to draw a fine line between art and pornography. The portrayal of women as sex objects has for too long gone unabated because in our consumer oriented society advertisers are all too well aware that sex sells. Family violence and wives forced into coercive sexual relations continue because many still entertain the notion that "a man's home is his castle." Not much cerebral functioning is required to see that all of this contributes to the abortion statistics, and therefore it is here that major changes need to be made.

It is also rather obvious, one would think, that women with unintended pregnancies, and preferably also their partners, are in greater need of access to counselling than they are to abortuaries. If provisions are made for full information about all the available options and services, and in a manner that is both positive and supportive, perhaps many can be spared the physical and emotional trauma associated with abortion. Counselling must not only include medical, but also related concerns such as housing, income support, employment, etc. More education is also needed to provide information regarding adoption choices, not only so that a birth mother's choice for adoption is not seen as a form of desertion, but also in order that the public's attitudes toward it improve.

While two individuals are responsible for bringing a new life into the world, responsibility for the continued well-being of children must be shared by all, especially when circumstances may militate against them. That necessitates a willingness to re-orient our individualistic lifestyles to incorporate a renewed sense of community. Voluntary agencies, such as Birthright, which provide pre-natal and post-natal care are a much needed step in the right direction. We must also be willing to fund social programmes. That hits hardest because it will mean increased taxes for these programmes, but it will also reflect our willingness to seek a life-affirming rather than a life-negating solution. The fact that many single women site socio-economic circumstances as reasons for abortion, means that those circumstances must be dealt with. Many single parent families have inadequate housing, especially to the large urban areas where the real estate market caters only to those who are well off. Because many young single mothers fear that an unintended pregnancy automatically destines them to a life of welfare and poverty, they must have opportunities to complete their secondary and post-secondary education. Employment equity is needed to eliminate the ever growing gap between income and family, especially for young single parent families. Income security for children is needed so that the necessary resources are available to sustain meaningful lives. Sufficient time for maternity leave ought to exist so that young mothers (even fathers) can adjust to the new situation.

All of these measures have financial repercussions and will entail radical adjustments. An increase in social programmes, of course, must entail an equitable distribution of the tax burden, otherwise those who can afford it least are still required to pay the most. Government, business and industry may need to pay closer attention to their employer's family situation. To what extent are we willing to shed our individualism to preserve our communal humanity? As long as we refuse to expand our present programmes we remain a society that is basically anti-children.

It is crucial also that we dispense with the all too prevalent notion that abortion is a "woman's issue". This erroneous assertion serves only to further the irresponsibility of many men. It is a known fact that all too many men responsible for pregnancies outside of marriage do not recognize or accept any responsibility for their actions. This is the hidden tragedy behind the abortion dilemma. That tragedy is further heightened when a generation of children grow up in the shadow of an absent father. Statistics reveal the unmistakable link between the long term impact of poor father models and young offenders. On the other hand, fathers are pursuing their rights to child custody, even resorting to civil suits to protect their unborn children. However, any discussion of a father's right needs necessarily to be accompanied with equal emphasis on responsibilities for child-rearing. We all need to broaden our view of fatherhood from one of merely impregnating and paying the bills to one of an active, on-going relationship with one's child or children.

We will gain nothing, of course, unless we also re-examine our basic orientations. Our nation is quickly becoming a spiritual wasteland, and as a result rapidly losing touch with what it means to be human. Our individual and materially oriented society is not only heaping destruction on the environment, but also on the unborn. We are a society that is violently anti-children, as well as anti-environment, willing to sacrifice both because of our myopic and short-term material pursuits. We talk much about individual rights, but little of responsibility for our actions, for those around us and for those to come. Responsible and meaningful sexual relations, a heightened appreciation of children and women, and equal regard for those around us may serve to nudge the human spirit from its slumber and give us a renewed sense of who we are, as individuals and as community. This is much needed if we hope to eliminate the need for abortion and restore any semblance of our humanity.

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