



Special Reports

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LIFE IN CANADA

A Commentary by Hilary White

It is a Canadian cliché that our neighbours to the south do not know much about Canada in general, but this axiom does not usually hold for pro-lifers, who seem to live almost without borders. This is why the reaction I get to the situation in Canada from my American friends usually surprises me. It is usually one of incredulity: “I thought Canada was such a great place to live!” “But Canadians are so *nice!*”

Since there really is little cultural difference between our two countries, how different could our judicial and legislative situations be? To the surprise of most of my American friends, the differences are profound and have much to do with the structures of political and judicial power. Pope John Paul II has said that abortion creates totalitarianism in the country that legalizes it. In the erosion of democratic freedoms in Canada, this prediction is being carried out before our eyes.

A brief history is in order. In 1969, under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, legislation called The Omnibus Bill was passed by Parliament. A woman seeking an abortion had to make her case to a hospital’s “therapeutic abortion” committee made up of three doctors. The committee could give approval for an abortion if necessary to protect the woman’s life or “health,” with health being interpreted so broadly that we effectively had abortion on demand. In 1970, the total number of legal abortions committed in Canada was 11,152. In one year, that number would almost triple to 30,949. This was the Government’s idea of keeping abortion “rare,” in the words of another legislator, John Turner, who helped to author the bill.

In 1988, with the total number of abortions reaching nearly 73,000, the Supreme Court of Canada, in a split decision, struck down the law relating to abortion. The Court declared it unconstitutional to require a woman to make her case to the abortion committee. Apart from an inadequate and ultimately failed 1989 effort to write a new law that retained abortion as a criminal offence, there have been no attempts on the part of any government in power to reinstate protection for the unborn. From that day to this there has been no law in Canada, a situation unique in the western world.

Even in Canada it is not widely known that there is no law limiting abortion. Abortion has not been positively given the status of a legal right as it has in the United States. In true Canadian fashion, the issue has simply been avoided and abortion is therefore not regulated. Taxpayers cover abortions in most provinces under the public medical insurance system and anyone who wants to kill her child may do so with no reason given. Parents of minors do not have to be informed and a 1989 Supreme Court decision made it impossible for a father to save his child’s life against the wishes of the mother.

Public opinion is moving further away from an ethic that values human life. The Canadian public has been left thoroughly confused in its understanding of the life issues by the overwhelmingly pro-abortion media and the silence of the spiritual leadership. Almost every poll shows the effectiveness of the “choice” propaganda. Nearly all Canadians feel that abortion is “undesirable,” but they almost always add the caveat that the “choice” should not be taken from women who want to kill their children. Such moral confusion is not, of course, unique to Canada but can be seen in every country.

Since the 1993 election of Jean Chrétien as Prime Minister, the intransigence of the federal government has solidified. There are two main bodies in the federal government: the elected Parliament and the appointed Senate. Bills passed in Parliament must be ratified by the Senate to be signed into law, but this generally a routine—almost ceremonial—process.

Chrétien has moved nearly all executive power to his own office. Appointments to the Senate and Supreme Court are entirely under his control. This utter lack of restraint on the governing powers, of checks and balances, the powerlessness of the opposition parties and the ideological commitment to anti-life and anti-family policies of the Prime Minister and his party has made pro-life political action a constant exercise in frustration. Due to the ideological influence on the appointment of Supreme Court justices, there has been a rise in judicial activism.

An atmosphere of almost Kafkaesque foreboding has been created in pro-life/pro-family circles by some of the activities of the so-called human rights tribunals, an extra-judicial legal body that enforces a decidedly left-liberal interpretation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The human rights commissions act as a kind of politically correct thought police without recourse to the normal legal proceedings of the courts. Activities that were once considered the rightful purview of churches, such as denouncing homosexual behaviour, abortion, and extramarital sex, can now be ruled “hateful” or discriminatory on the basis of a single denunciation from a disgruntled complainant. The subject of the complaint is then hounded by a non-elected, extrajudicial body on what are essentially their personal ideological interpretations of the Canadian Charter of Rights.

This practice has devastating consequences on ordinary citizens. A Christian printer was ordered to produce homosexual promotional material. The publisher of a major news magazine was ordered to take “sensitivity” re-education. A bed and breakfast owned by a devout Christian family was put out of business by an order to welcome homosexual couples as guests. A Christian university with a students’ code of conduct prohibiting premarital and homosexual activities was forced to spend nearly \$2 million defending its ability to grant teaching degrees. It was allegedly producing teachers who discriminated against homosexual students.

Freedom of speech and assembly, two of the foundational rights of any democracy, are being eroded to protect abortionists from protest or journalistic investigation. In many places in Canada, it is possible to be arrested for attempting to communicate with a woman entering an abortion facility. There are people in Canada who have been arrested because they were praying silently on the public sidewalk, thus violating the so-called “bubble zone” no-protest area surrounding abortion facilities. Three reporters were arrested and their film was confiscated when they recorded the arrest of a sidewalk counsellor.

The slippery slope, which started with abortion on demand, has led us down into a whole new realm of threats against human life. Though currently illegal, euthanasia is gaining popular support. Although Robert Latimer was jailed for ten years for the murder of his disabled daughter, the public clamour for liberalization of anti-euthanasia laws was enormous. Editorials appeared in the major newspapers that called Tracy Latimer, who had cerebral palsy, a “vegetable” and “not a real human being.” Euthanasia is now commonplace, though still very quietly practiced in hospitals and nursing homes.

Pro-life activists are currently fighting a bill that will allow destructive experimentation on embryonic human beings. The public shrugs its collective shoulders about “spare embryos” from in vitro fertilization clinics and asks why we should not “get some good out of them, since they are going to be thrown in the garbage anyway.” No one seems to hear the echo from the Nuremberg trials over half a century ago when the Nazi camp doctors made precisely the same excuse for their experiments on Jews. The so-called genetic selection of embryos to eliminate the unfit has become an accepted practice, reviving the eugenics craze to purge the race of undesirable traits.

Pro-life organizations in Canada are more or less split between those that primarily do educational work in the schools and those that specialize in political action. On the whole the pro-life community is a great family of people working for common cause. More and more young people are getting actively involved. There are more youth and student pro-life groups on campuses every year.

One positive sign that does not often get mention are the great strides in unity between churches made by the common cause of the pro-life movement. Nowhere else do Catholics and Evangelicals work more freely together than in the pro-life movement. No one is asked to agree on points of doctrine and the atmosphere of respect for life spills over in the daily interaction of Catholics and Protestants as well as between Christians and people of other faiths.

The casual attitude toward human life created by abortion on demand has given us less and less ground on which to fight for the lives of the sick, the elderly, the disabled, and the unborn. But under the dark clouds of the Culture of Death, rays of light are appearing. Pro-life people are not deterred but are all the more inspired. The unity in the movement internationally is growing with groups and individuals meeting on the common ground of life at the United Nations, the European Parliament at events like World Youth Day and international conferences.

The differences between the situations of the pro-life movement in the United States and Canada are not immediately obvious. In many places they overlap. The field grows larger and the subject becomes more complex with every year. On both sides of the border the Culture of Death is making great advances, but nothing deters Canadian pro-life people from proclaiming the truth—life is always and everywhere sacred.

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