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Editorial

The Same-Sex Marriage Debate and the Agenda of the Religious Right

This week, parliament is scheduled to begin debate on legislation recognizing the right of gay and lesbian couples to marry. The religious right – an alliance of the Catholic Church and various fundamentalist churches and sects – has launched a major campaign to convince parliamentarians to vote against the proposed legislation. Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party have adopted and are promoting all of the positions of the religious right on this issue, including raising the spectres of polygamy and incest if the definition of marriage is altered.

The religious right is claiming that marriage is a sacred religious institution and that any change in its definition will result in the destruction of society as we know it. This position is based on a falsehood about the nature of marriage and is irrational in the extreme. Marriage is primarily a property relationship; throughout most of the history of class society women and children have constituted part of the property in the relationship. Religion was brought into the equation only in so far as it was necessary to maintain

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National Day of Action Marked by Winnipeg Students



On February 2, about 1,500 university students in Winnipeg held a rally at the University of Manitoba calling on the Provincial government to maintain its current tuition fee freeze. The rally, organized by the Canadian Federation of Students, was part of National Day of Action to draw attention to the critical state of post-secondary education funding. The CFS pointed out that the current tuition fee freeze has been accompanied by a 30 per cent increase in enrolment at post-secondary institutions showing that lower tuition fees improve access to post-secondary education. At the same time the CFS expressed concerns that the Provincial government was under increasing pressure to abandon the tuition fee freeze. The CFS also pointed that all Manitoba post-secondary institutions face critical shortages in funding for maintenance, programming and faculty - a situation which impacts negatively on the quality of education.

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women and children in a position of oppression. Modern society has destroyed many of the underpinnings of such a relationship and attitudes within society have changed accordingly. Today, almost half of all marriages end in divorce and a significant and people are increasingly opting for other arrangements, such as common-law relationships, as opposed to formal marriages. In other words, the entire institution of marriage is in crisis and in danger of becoming extinct as a popular institution. Be that as it may, if a couple wants to get married it is their civil right to do so, regardless of whether or not they are opposite sex or same sex.

The arguments being advanced by the religious right simply will not stand the light of day. For example, it insists on its right to impose its narrow religious interpretation of marriage on the entire society, claiming that its particular viewpoint represents "God's Will". Then it goes on to warn that allowing same-sex marriages will open the door to polygamy, incest and under-age marriages. However, if these religious zealots actually read their bibles they would discover that all of those practices were commonplace in the Old Testament and, therefore, presumably endorsed by their god at one time or another. It is also difficult to follow the logic that allowing same-sex couples to marry will somehow impact on religious freedoms or on the legitimacy of heterosexual marriages. Societal recognition of marriage may lend some respectability to the institution, but ultimately marriage is a relationship between two people and the value of a particular marriage depends on the content of that relationship and not the content of some other relationship. Of course there is also an issue of hypocrisy in all of this, since the religious right, itself, has been riddled with scandals involving marital infidelity.

When the arguments being presented are preposterous, it is usually a sign that they are being offered only as a cover for the real positions of those giving them. In this case, despite the official protestations of Stephen Harper and various religious leaders that they are not opposed to gay rights, less politically correct religious spokespersons have been quite blunt that this is their real issue. These individuals have openly stated that the recognition of

same-sex marriages constitutes official endorsement and encouragement of homosexuality and that this is an affront to their god. This position is particularly ironic coming from the Catholic Church which has been wracked by scandals in recent years. However, we are no longer living in the Middle Ages when the religious institutions dictated the law to society and committed terrible crimes against anyone who was considered different or who challenged the authority of the church. The separation of church and state in a modern society was not some arbitrary decision by misguided community leaders, but an absolute necessity to ensure the recognition of even the most basic of human rights, as well as to allow the development of democratic institutions. So long as religious authority dominated, with its deep-seated self-righteousness and arbitrariness, no human, civil or democratic rights could possibly flourish and modern society was impossible.

Why is the religious right so concerned about either same-sex marriage or homosexuality? How do these issues in any way affect their freedom to practice their religion in whatever way they see fit? The fact of the matter is that there is no relationship whatsoever between the recognition of the civil rights of same-sex couples and freedom of religion. But freedom of religion is not and never has been the concern of the religious right. In fact, their agenda is precisely the opposite, to eliminate freedom of religion, as well as various human, civil and democratic rights and to impose their own particular beliefs on the entire society. Furthermore, the issue of religion *per se* has little to do with anything. The religious right is in fact a political movement and not a religious movement; religion is simply a convenient cloak to disguise the underlying politics and avoid public criticism. In this regard the current campaign against same-sex marriage is a repeat of the campaign against abortion in which the religious right decries aborting unborn fetuses but shows little regard for the welfare of those children who have been born into conditions of poverty and misery.

The particular religious sects that make up the religious right have been around for some time, but the religious right was the creation of Jerry Falwell and his "Moral Majority" of the 1970s and 1980s.

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World Social Forum Concludes

The fifth World Social Forum concluded in Porto Alegre, Brazil on January 31, following thousands of meetings, discussions, debates, speeches and cultural presentations. Over 150,000 people from 135 countries took part in the forum, the biggest to date. Over 300 proposals to further revolutionary and progressive movements in different regions and globally were put forward from the various panels and workshops. The forum organizing committee has committed to organizing and publishing these proposals within the next few months. It was also decided that instead of holding one central forum in Brazil in 2006, a number of different forums will be held in different regions of the world, and that the 2007 World Social Forum will be held in Africa.

One of the highlights of the forum was the closing address given by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Speaking in front of tens of thousands of people packed into Gigantinho Stadium, Chavez was greeted with cheers and sustained applause. Dozens of the banners hanging throughout the stadium hailed him and the resistance of the Venezuelan people to the attempts by the U.S. imperialists to overthrow Chavez. He received the loudest ovation when he

declared that “imperialism is not invincible” and urged activists to renew their organizing efforts to transform the world. Chavez said that capitalism was incapable of solving the problems confronting the peoples of the world and declared that socialism did have a future.

Chavez also took aim squarely at the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), proclaiming that it was “dead ... because U.S. imperialism did not have the strength to impose the neocolonial model of the FTAA.” Instead, Chavez said, the U.S. has all but abandoned its plans for a hemispheric free trade zone under its control and has instead thrown its energy into negotiating side agreements with different countries in the Americas.

The World Social Forum as an institution has its origins in the anti-capitalist movement of the past decade. The forums have been positive in that they have provided a space for thousands of activists to gather and discuss the struggles they are involved in and the challenges they face. The challenge facing the progressive movement now is how to create conditions to transform the aspirations of the people for a better world into reality.

U.S. Steps up Rhetoric Against Venezuela

Speaking at a press conference on February 1, White House spokesman Scott McClellan told reporters that the U.S. government has “serious concerns” about the situation in Venezuela. McClellan said the U.S. has also spoken to other Latin American leaders on the subject. “We have made our concerns known when it comes to President Chavez. We have talked about our concerns with other leaders in the Americas. And we have made our views known in terms of the way he has treated the opposition in his country and the way he has treated the media in his country as well, and we will continue to do so.”

Venezuela’s Foreign Relations Minister Ali Rodriguez, in response to McClellan’s comments, pointed out that there is reason to be concerned when the U.S. starts expressing concerns. “Many countries in the world have come to know the consequences of the ‘serious concerns’ of the Americans”, Rodriguez said. The “concern” over Latin American governments shown by previous U.S. administrations has resulted in armed invasion and support for brutal dictatorships in order to overthrow governments that in

any way posed a challenge to U.S. imperialist interests, he said. He highlighted several examples, including the overthrow of the Arbenz government in Guatemala, the coup against Salvador Allende in Chile and the invasion of Panama in 1989. Most recently, the U.S. was behind an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Chavez government and has openly provided support to Venezuelan ‘opposition’ leaders who are determined to overthrow Chavez despite the strong electoral mandate he has received repeatedly from the Venezuelan people. “The people of Venezuela have defeated the opposition through nine electoral processes and have given President Chavez firm and growing support,” Rodriguez said.

McClellan’s comments echo those made earlier by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who described President Chavez as a “negative force in the region.” In response to those comments, Chavez told the World Social Forum that “the most negative force in the world today is the government of the United States.”

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Born in the former slave states of the southern United States, the “Moral Majority” was a response to the advances achieved by the civil rights movement during the 1960s and a political attempt to undo those achievements. The “Moral Majority” was neither moral nor a majority; it represented the desire of the former slave owning class to restore its past power and glory. In many ways, it represented the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in a more respectable and acceptable form. It was racist, anti-Semitic and very much based on the notion of the United States as a white, Christian nation. Although Falwell’s “Moral Majority” has long since been disbanded, its political legacy persists in the alliance of Catholic and fundamentalist churches and sects which constitute the American religious right and which possess enormous political power within the American state.

The Reform Party attempted to build a similar power base in Canada by importing the politics of the American religious right to this country. When it failed to make any headway outside of Western Canada, the Reform Party attempted to shed its overt religiosity and, after several incarnations, eventually became today’s Conservative Party under the leadership of Stephen Harper. However, the issue of same-sex marriage has proved that this party has not strayed very far from its roots in the American religious right. This is an issue which is largely driven by Americans and would-be Americans within the Canadian religious right. The Canadian Catholic Church recently admitted that its campaign against same-sex marriage legislation is being financed almost entirely by American money, to the tune of several million dollars. The arguments being advanced by Harper and the Canadian religious right are also largely American arguments and the religious right in the United States admits that turning back the clock in Canada will assist them in doing the same in the United States. Meanwhile, a significant majority of Canadians have indicated that they are not interested in the debate and that they do not see same-sex rights as impacting on their own rights. Only one in ten Canadians would want to see an election called on the issue.

What is really at stake here is that a very active and wealthy political movement in the United States

wants to eliminate the very concept of human rights and reintroduce medievalism to American society. It is a movement which promotes and hopes to take advantage of the worst kinds of ignorance, irrationality and bigotry to create a political culture and political climate in which a fascist movement can take hold. It is a movement which really cares nothing about either religion or freedom, but which cynically uses both to achieve political power. The Bush regime in the United States shows what the religious right will do with political power once it achieves it; the assault on the civil rights of Americans, including the assault on religious freedoms, has been unprecedented during the past four years. The American Constitution, which the religious right claims to defend, has been trampled on by the Bush administration, while hundreds of billions of dollars have been funnelled from the public treasury into the pockets of various Bush cronies in the name of the “war on terror”.

Those in Canada who seek to Americanize Canadian political culture by promoting the most backward religiosity and who are attempting to roll back the civil rights of Canadians in the name of “religious freedom” have the same aim as their American counterparts. They are attempting to create a culture of self-righteousness, ignorance and irrationality as the basis of a fascist political movement which can be used to crush any attempt by Canadians to move society forward.

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