

Parliament can't simply demand people feel good about Islam

by Conrad Black



Liberal MP Iqra Khalid is congratulated by colleagues as she speaks about her anti-Islamophobia motion on Feb. 15, 2017.

There are several problems with the House of Commons private members' motion 103 on "systemic racism and religious discrimination." It is based on the assertion that there is a "need to quell" an "increasing public climate of hate and fear" and, implicitly, that the Parliament of Canada has the ability to "quell" it. I believe all of these premises are mistaken. I don't believe that any such climate as the MP who presented the motion, Iqra Khalid (Liberal, Mississauga-Erin Mills) believes, exists. One of the greatest sociological

changes in this country in my now rather lengthy recollection is the very pronounced reduction in racial, sectarian, philosophical, gender, and sex-orientation prejudice. Vast numbers of immigrants from all over the world have generally been very whole-heartedly received in Canada and their collective contribution to the maturation and enrichment of the country is almost universally acknowledged. I know of no other country, except possibly Australia, that has accepted such comparatively large numbers of people from the most varied countries of origin so equably.

There is some fear generated by racial violence and several murders in Canada in recent years involving Muslims, as perpetrators or victims. But it is not an irrational fear, and doesn't afflict the whole system, if the system referred to is more broadly based than small and furtive groups of organized bigots. Nor is it clear to me that Parliament has any ability or right to affect whatever level of fear and hate may exist. Ms. Khalid proposes that this objective be tackled by condemning "Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination ... (by taking) note of House of Commons petition e-411," and by requesting a study from the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. The principal religious discrimination in Canada is that the almost universal official attitude of atheism effectively considers any reference to God as discriminatory against non-believers and a violation of the absurdly over-worked desire for separation of church and state. That separation is generally considered to be violated by any reference to the existence of religious belief, apart from charitable platitudes. Indeed Islam is almost the only religion in Canada that is not the subject of at least tepid official disdain.

The petition e-411 referred to was advanced by the president of the Canadian Muslim Forum, Samer Majzoub, in 2016, and credits Islam with a large contribution "to the positive development of human civilization," claims that the number of

Islamic terrorists is “infinitesimally small,” and is unrepresentative of the world Muslim population, and asks that all Canadians recognize that and condemn Islamophobia. The Standing Committee’s study, under Ms. Khalid’s motion, is to develop a “whole-of-government approach” to fighting the alleged “systemic racism and religious discrimination ... while ensuring a community-centred focus with a holistic response through evidence-based policy-making.” It is also charged to “collect data to contextualize hate crime reports and to conduct needs assessments for impacted communities.” This choice of words gets to the edge of incomprehensible bureau-speak, but essentially seems to wish to recruit every employee of the federal government to a role of crusading against any differentiation or even recognition of racial or religious individuality and seeks deep background and remedial recommendations for all reports of hate crimes anywhere in the country.



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The motion proclaims the existence of a threat to civil society that is tremendously exaggerated, asking the federal government to launch a total war on what is a very scattered and largely undefinable phenomenon, and asking for mountains of anecdotal opinion from all those who can formulate a claim that they have been disparaged or mistreated because of their race or religion, or have observed this treatment of others. The fact is that it is up to the Muslim leaders in the world, including some in Canada, to be a good deal less ambiguous about and apologetic for the conduct of Islamic extremists, though Mr. Majzoub specifically condemns them. Ms. Khalid’s motion urges the government “to better reflect the enshrined rights and freedoms in the Constitution Acts, including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.” Those rights include the liberty of anybody to hold and express negative views about any religious denomination or ethnic group or individual

as long as they are not inciting hatred, which invites premature recourse to the kangaroo courts of the Human Rights Commissions. It is of the nature of those inquisition chambers that retroactive mind-reading and imputation of guilty motives routinely trespass on individual rights of freedom of expression.

The principal role in strengthening the prestige of the Muslim world will have to be played by the secular and clerical leaders of Islam to enable the other four-fifths of the world to distinguish more easily between the violent fanatics and their fellow travellers and the reasonable majority of Muslims, and to discourage and punish acts of criminal violence against non-Muslim minorities in their midst. The Coptic minority in Egypt, much larger than the Muslim minority in any Western country, and the Christians in Syria and Iraq, have been treated with disgusting brutality and it has scarcely elicited an audible reproof from the civil and ecclesiastical leaders of Islam (or of Western governments, except the Vatican).



THE CANADIAN PRESS/Justin Tang Minister of Canadian Heritage Melanie Joly rises during Question Period in the House of Commons on Parliament Hill, Thursday, Feb. 16, 2017 in Ottawa.

Of course, I agree that Islamophobia and religious and racial discrimination generally are contemptible, but they are usually not crimes, and the reasonable Muslim majority can scarcely be surprised at a tendency to regard large swaths of Islam with suspicion, when the Muslim leadership is almost mute about the mistreatment of Christian and Jewish communities in Muslim countries, and shriek like banshees at any suggestion that they are being assimilated to Islamic terrorists when their own efforts to restrain or suppress Islamist terror is so frequently sporadic and ineffectual.

I get around fairly well and I have heard nothing in this country from anyone that has been as abusive as some of the letters and emails to this newspaper two years ago when I wrote that advocates of the existence of a divine intelligence are generally successful in debates with famous atheists. I did not state any religious views of my own (though it is no secret that I am a Christian) and was pilloried by many as a superstitious idiot. But I didn't petition Parliament or inflict myself on a Human Rights Commission. There are serious limits to what Parliament or government can do in a free country about people's opinions. The freedoms Ms. Khalid cites include the right to think and speak negatively about other people and groups. Parliament cannot and should not aspire to turn the country into a judgment-free zone, a vast Pleasantville. Democracy is self-government and that cannot occur without the right of everyone to say and believe what they want, as long as it is not seditious, defamatory, or an incitement to illegal behavior.

Getting further into the area of soliciting denunciations of people because of offensive things they have said, and trying to discourage obnoxious or sociopathic or even hateful opinions, will not eliminate them and is apt to compromise democracy rather than strengthen it. I do not doubt the virtue of Ms. Khalid and Mr. Majzoub's motives, but it is impossible to increase the respect in which Islam is held by simply demanding it. Only Muslims can attract increased collective admiration from non-Muslims, and they will not do that by trying to infringe the freedom of expression of everyone else and by indulging their co-religionists who regularly and in large numbers revile the rest of us as infidels. Christianity is 600 years senior to Islam and has 600 million more adherents, and, for all its historic failings, a much less violent history. And Christians generally regard Islam with more respect than they receive back from Muslims. The numbers of extremists who lurk and fester among the reasonable and civilized Muslims may be "infinitesimally small" and I hope

they are, but they have killed many thousands of innocent people in terrorist acts in almost every Western country over the last 20 years.

The Islamic leaders are not remotely doing all they can to reassure the world, including the people of this country, of the tolerant spirit of the Muslim majority. Not one per cent of Canadians has any problem with Muslims and anyone else having and practicing their religion and cultural traditions, as long as they are not an affront to the laws of this country. Islamophobia, in the sense of a visceral dislike of everyone who is a Muslim, is "infinitesimally small" in this country. But those who seek greater respect for Islam have to earn it, not just require it from Parliament, which has no jurisdiction to confer or confer it.

Note: I apologize to Rick Peterson, Conservative leadership candidate, for omitting him from the list of bilingual contenders last week. I have now met him and found him a strong (and bilingual) candidate. I have also had representations on behalf of other candidates, and will review the candidates in early April. My point remains that a unilingual leader is unlikely to win a general election against the bilingual Justin Trudeau. I also meant to refer to the traditional success of the Liberals in out-bidding the Conservatives for the support of third parties and not just the CCF-NDP, and apologize for that confusion also.

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