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A Canadian Dictionary Redefines Marriage: Will it Stand?

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Katherine Barber is counting on that. Editor-in-Chief of The Canadian Oxford Dictionary, Barber is launching a social revolution of her own. She has decided that marriage must be redefined in order to accommodate homosexual marriage. The new definition of “marriage” in The Canadian Oxford Dictionary will be “the legal or religious union of two people.” That’s it. This union between two persons—regardless of gender—replaces what millions of persons have known as marriage throughout human history.

“Dictionaries just reflect what the actual reality is,” Barber told The Calgary Herald. “If a dictionary says a marriage is the union of a man and a woman, that’s just describing the fact that this has been the case for hundreds of years. But if the law changes, or society changes, or something happens where the word marriage comes to apply to same-sex unions, we just change the definition.” [see Canadian news coverage]

Will Mr. Webster please call his office? This is either deliberate misrepresentation or evidence of professional incompetence. Ms. Barber’s claim that dictionaries just describe an already existing reality is absurd. Dictionaries shape the reality even as they reflect existing word usage. And marriage as a union between a man and a woman “has been the case for hundreds of years?” Just how many hundreds, Ms. Barber?

This casual dismissal reveals her antipathy toward marriage as an institution central to human life for millennia. But then, what does the wisdom of the ages have to do with her task of updating The Canadian Oxford Dictionary? Ms. Barber is a thoroughly modern woman—and an advocate of the homosexual agenda.

We know this because she chose to editorialize about the issue, explaining that the only reason anyone would object to her new gender-free definition of marriage is—you guessed it—“homophobia.” Opponents of this new definition, she charged, “don’t want to admit that gay people can have relationships that are just like their ideal heterosexual relationship.” Clearly, Ms. Barber is not just concerned about words. She’s out to change the world.

Until recently, the official legal definition of marriage in Canada was “the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others.” But a June 10 decision handed down by an Ontario provincial appeals court found this definition to violate the dignity of homosexual couples. In its decision, the court redefined marriage as “the voluntary union for life of two persons to the exclusion of all others.” [see September 19 Web Log][see 9/19 web log] This monumental shift places the Canadian court on a collision course with controversy.

The Chretien government has asked the Canadian Supreme Court to review the case, and has pledged to put the issue

before the Canadian Parliament in a free vote (not constrained by party affiliation). The issue is thus far from settled, though homosexual activists have been gaining ground in Canada in recent years, and polls indicate that homosexual marriage may be favored by a slight majority of Canadian voters.

As for the sudden announcement about The Canadian Oxford Dictionary, an editorial in The Montreal Gazette accused Katherine Barber and her colleagues of jumping the gun: "As Canadians struggle whether marriage should be redefined to include unions between homosexuals, the editors of The Canadian Oxford Dictionary have galloped out of the starting gate holding Yes banners." The paper's editorial directed attention to the legal and political hurdles still to be crossed by homosexual marriage advocates and noted, "the matter has hardly been settled yet." [see editorial]

This reveals the dishonesty behind Ms. Barber's claim that her dictionary just reflects "what the reality is." More accurately, her definition reflects what she wants the reality to be.

The official Oxford University Press Canada web site claims that The Canadian Oxford Dictionary sets "a new standard of excellence," and promises that Canadian readers will be "able to see their language, and themselves, accurately and comprehensively described." If the press is to live up to this promise, its publisher had better call Ms. Barber to task and reverse this hasty revision. Otherwise, the press had better withdraw its claims.

In his Memoir of a Superfluous Man, Albert Jay Nock noted, "As sheer casual reading matter, I still find the English dictionary to be the most interesting book in our language." Nock was fascinated by the discovery of new words and the tracing of word origins. He did not have in mind the creation of new definitions tailor-made to fit modern sexual "lifestyles." In our day, dictionaries may be interesting for all the wrong reasons.

The editors of The Canadian Oxford Dictionary may change their definition of marriage, but those who honor marriage as the basic building block of civilization will refuse to join the redefinition. We did not invent marriage; it is the God-ordained covenant that unites a man and a woman in the monogamous marital union, establishes a new household, and liberates the married couple to enjoy all the benefits—and bear all the responsibilities—of married life and parenthood.

Homosexual activists may win in the courts and in the dictionary, but they cannot reverse reality. Redefining marriage to include homosexual unions is moral insanity, and it will come at a high cost.

At the same time, we must recognize that words really are important, and the power to define words is not to be ignored. The agenda and worldview of the editors of this dictionary are evident for all to see. Where is the Canadian outrage? Are they willing to allow Ms. Barber and company to label all who disagree with their new definition as "homophobic?"

We should note that the homosexual activists cannot get around the institution of marriage. Its very existence is clear proof that homosexuality is not "just like" heterosexuality. Marriage is an institutional judgment upon homosexuality itself. Since the homosexual couples cannot meet the requirements of marriage, they will attempt to destroy marriage by redefinition.

Samuel Johnson, whose 1755 Dictionary set the standards for all other English-language dictionaries that would follow, defined marriage as "the act of uniting a man and a woman for life." He got it right the first time. Then again, Katherine Barber would say that he was just a homophobe.

