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## Do minority groups have the right to change the English language?

There's one very encouraging thing about the uproar in Parliament over gay marriage on Tuesday. It shows Canadian democracy is not dead. For a while there we weren't sure.

MPs, especially Liberal MPs in Ontario, are being yanked back and forth between their caucus whip on one side, and a furiously aroused minority of conservative voters back home. Angry minorities terrify elected politicians, and it's beginning to dawn on them that there are a lot more angry conservatives than angry gays.

So many Liberals have deserted the government position on gay marriage that a scant three votes the other way would have turned it. But this was only a skirmish set up by the opposition. The real battle is yet to be fought, and probably during an election. It's now impossible to predict which side will prevail.

The one certainty is that the issue cannot go away.

Nor should it. Marriage creates and binds families, and families create society. Social decisions are collective, by definition. So too is the meaning of words. Words mean what most people take them to mean.

So when some judge decides that the word "marriage" can mean man-and-man as much as it means woman-and-man, he might as well say that because ducks swim they are legally fish. If judges or politicians start pretending that words

mean what they don't, the laws they impose will not work.

In fact, this whole argument is about meaning, not about rights. A reader named Ian wrote me last week, "I fail to see how, if John and Peter want to incorporate themselves in a publicly recognized union by which one can inherit the other's worldly goods, that will interfere with the freedom of Michael and Mary to do the same thing. And if 51 per cent of the population oppose it and deny it legal recognition, 'democracy' has triumphed at the expense of freedom."

I don't know if Ian is trying to be clever or is merely misinformed, but John and Peter have always been free legally to will each other their property. Legally they can bestow it on their pet cat, and always could.

What's more, since 1995 John and Peter have won full spousal benefits from the public purse. That too is a done deal. We are no longer talking about benefits.

What's being decided now (this time by Parliament) is whether their unions will be called "marriages." That's all. The bill is one page.

As ever, we hear the siren call for "equality." If ordinary marriages get to be called that, why not unions of homosexuals? Are they less somehow less valid?

In short, the question is now one of social prestige. When Michael and Mary go out with their squabbling brood and say "We're married," it conveys something re-

spectable to everyone who hears it. What we are now being asked (or told) to accept is that when John and Peter show up and say they're "married" too, that's equally respectable.

Well, is it? The only way to find out is to ask the public. Put it to a referendum.

Oh no, say the Ian MacDougalls of this world, that would be the "tyranny of the majority." It would be unfair.

Rubbish. If minorities want a public concession, they should ask the public's permission.

In a 1999 case which nobody paid much attention to (Law versus Canada), the Supreme Court ruled that a person's minority rights are violated if he or she feels marginalized, ignored and devalued.

In other words, the majority is to be tyrannized by the hurt feelings of minorities--or at least of those minorities whose behavior the courts choose to protect from criticism.

Judgments like Law v. Canada are so arbitrary, fuzzy and open-ended you begin to suspect that these judges are not just out of control, you wonder if they live on the same planet as the rest of us.

- Link Byfield

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