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Press Release

Human Rights for Minorities not up for Bargain Muslim Canadian Congress endorses Same-Sex Marriage legislation

OTTWA, February 1, 2005 — The Muslim Canadian Congress, a Toronto-based grassroots organization, has welcomed the legislation presented by Justice Minister Irving Cotler that re-defines marriage to include same-sex partners, and has urged Muslims and other minority groups to stand in solidarity with gays and lesbians.

Addressing a press conference in Ottawa this morning, Rizwana Jafri, president of the MCC said Muslim Canadians have experienced life as a marginalized minority and have relied on the Canadian Charter to fight for their right to be treated as equal citizens. "It is incumbent upon us, as a minority, to stand up in solidarity with Canada's gays and lesbians despite the fact that many in our community believe our religion does not condone homosexuality," she added.

"This legislation is not about religion; it is about fundamental and universal human rights that are a guarantee that all Canadians, irrespective of their religious or ethnic background, feel part of the same family. While, within this family, we may agree to disagree we must respect each other and treat others with dignity that is a hallmark of civil society, Ms. Jafri added.

Ms. Jafri appealed to social conservative Muslim organizations to stop being used by the Conservative Party who are using this controversy to score political points by spreading fear among racial minorities.

She appealed to Prime Minister Paul Martin to make sure his caucus supports the legislation and are not allowed to wriggle out of their responsibility to respect Human Rights and the decisions of majority of Provincial Courts. Ms. Jafri thanked the NDP leader Jack Layton for enforcing party discipline and not allowing dissent on this important matter.

She called on Paul Martin to invite NDP leader Jack Layton and Gilles Duceppe of the Bloc Québécois to tour the country to build support for this historic legislation and present a common front on human rights.

Tarek Fatah, host of the CTS-TV show, The Muslim Chronicle, criticized the fear mongering started by some religious institutions against same-sex marriage. "The religious institutions who are spreading fear among their congregations are not being honest about this law. No mosque, church, temple, or synagogue will ever have to conduct a same-sex marriage if they don't wish to. The guarantee of the freedom of religion in our constitution and the legislation presented today ensure that every Canadian will continue to have the right to practice their religion as they deem fit. However, freedom of religion cannot come at the cost of limiting the rights of other groups in society.

Mr. Fatah said that under thinly veiled camouflage of cultural and religious practices, a message of hate and homophobia was being cultivated. "The hate mongering against gays and lesbians must be stopped. Places of worship should never be permitted to demean a section of the community who are a minority, he added.

Barrister Arif Raza told the press conference that he understood the concerns of some Muslims who are worried that allowing same-sex marriage will dilute the institution of marriage, but emphasized that those asking for Prime Minister Martin to use the Notwithstanding Clause should understand that one day, the rights of Muslims too could be compromised if the using the Notwithstanding clause became a precedent.

"I urge Canada's Muslim community and other minority communities to show solidarity with Canada's gays and lesbians even if they have reservations about homosexuality. We don't have to agree with each other to stand up for the human rights of those with whom we disagree, Mr. Raza added.

He asked Canadians to be generous, kind and compassionate in this matter. By supporting the rights of a minority, we will be able to walk with our heads held high among the nations of this earth. "Today we have an opportunity to stand tall and demonstrate that fighting for human rights is only worthwhile when we fight it for the other, not just for ourselves," said Arif Raza.

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