

Bains: Bill C-623 divisive, aims to pit Canadians against each other for political gain

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Bill C-623 is designed to fan the flames of the reasonable accommodation debate while targeting a specific group for the sole purpose of making political hay. The law is targeted primarily at Muslim women who wear face coverings as part of their religion. The bill is shameless.

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By Navdeep Bains

When members of the Conservative government want to stoke an issue without taking direct responsibility they often resort to private members' bills. Items that for one reason or another are deemed too explosive or sensitive to be pushed as official policy are given to backbench MPs to push as their own ideas but with the talking points and media machinery provided by the PMO.

This gives the government just the right amount of distance to at once embrace or reject the idea based on how it's received. They did this with the long gun registry and they're doing it with Bill C-623 which seeks to require voters to show their face before being allowed to vote. The law is targeted primarily at Muslim women who wear face coverings as part of their religion.

Let me start off by calling out this bill for what it is: a shameless, divisive piece of legislation that aims to pit one group of Canadians against another for political gain. The governing Conservatives first tried to pass this as a government bill in the form of Bill C-6 which was introduced prior to the 2008 election and left to die when Harper ordered the House dissolved. Feeling the backlash from that debate the Conservatives did nothing about the issue for nearly three years before deciding that a private members' bill was the best way to leverage the bill's divisive power without burning themselves again.

The reason for its return? For the past few years, the province of Quebec has been gripped by an unpleasant debate over the idea of "reasonable accommodation"... the underlying goal being to determine the limits of social tolerance for other people's religious and cultural beliefs. This debate is also happening in other parts of the country but it is Quebec where it has achieved unparalleled prominence and media attention. Conservatives of course are constantly seeking to shore up their support in the province, hence the bill.

Bill C-623 is designed to fan the flames of the reasonable accommodation debate while targeting a specific group for the sole purpose of making political hay. Never mind the fact that using a photo ID to identify oneself at the polls is only one of three options

available to citizens who come out to vote. For example you can bring a hydro bill and library card both with no photo and be allowed to vote. How does seeing someone's face help to confirm their identity when the only identification has no pictures? Are we supposed to assume that clever poll clerks will challenge perspective voters by saying, "You can't possibly be a Jasmine you look more like a Mary?" Of course not. Given that it creates a special requirement for one group of people the bill is unfair, impractical and frankly unnecessary.

This bill seeks to solve a problem that doesn't exist; namely hordes of electoral fraudsters dressing up in burqas to game the system. According to Elections Canada, out of the 14 million ballots cast in 2008, not one person voted with a face covering. If fraud were actually a concern then the Conservatives would have looked at tightening rules around mail-in ballots where no identification at all is required. Better yet the Conservative Party could also come clean about allegations that were serious enough for Elections Canada to charge four party officials including two Conservative Senators with electoral fraud.

Those are real documented charges as opposed to imaginary schemes.

This is the worst kind of politics. In trying to appeal to ignorance and fear the Conservatives have betrayed the trust given to them by Canadians. We are not a country that seeks to promote division or to vilify a certain group, Canada is a place where all are welcome and the rules apply evenly. Lawmakers have a duty to respect our constitutional democracy and only put forward laws that are consistent with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. If Bill C-623 is indeed a true private members' bill then I call on the Conservatives to denounce it immediately.

Anything less serves as an endorsement of these tactics which would be a travesty not just for Muslim women but indeed all Canadians.

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