

Out of desperation to claim title as the most politically correct institution in Canada, the Toronto District School Board has made itself a target for mockery twice in the last month.

Last week, the TDSB announced that, out of respect for Indigenous peoples, it was going to retire “chief” from its senior staff nomenclature, changing such honorifics as “chief of social work” to “manager of social work.” They claimed it was a requirement from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report. Only it wasn’t. Critics had a field day ridiculing them.

A more serious blunder occurred with the publication of the TDSB’s Islamic Heritage Guidebook for Islam Heritage Month (October). The guidebook — a full 170 pages long — contained a definition of Islamophobia that raised alarm bells to wit: “Islamophobia refers to fear, prejudice, hatred or dislike directed against Islam or Muslims, or towards Islamic politics or culture.” It was quickly, and publicly, noted that “Islamic politics or culture” was so broad that anything voiced with the word “Islam” or “Muslims” in it falling short of overt praise (including the rest of this column) could be construed as Islamophobic.

A spokesperson said the words had been inserted in error. There was no error

A TDSB spokesperson stated the concerning words had been inserted “in error” and would be removed. But there was no “error” in the composition of the definition. This guidebook was composed with infinitesimal care lavished on every single word it contains, as you’ll see if, as I did, you take the trouble to read the whole thing. Instead of “in error,” the TDSB was “at fault.” For it seems to me the TDSB officials were so eager to ingratiate themselves with their Muslim partners on this project that they failed to read what was presented to them with a critical eye, and so overlooked the danger the controversial words represented.

But that isn’t the only thing in the guidebook that makes me uneasy. For instance, quite appropriately alluding to Malala Yousafzai as an example of a courageous Muslim girl who paid a horrible price for her (modestly) feminist principles, the guidebook states, “This brave young girl survived an attack by those who didn’t support education of girls...”

Well sorry, but that won’t do. I quite understand the instinct to put one’s best cultural foot forward during these heritage months, but there are limits. Malala was violently assaulted by fellow Muslims practicing an extremist version of Islam that has for decades dominated a significant swath of the Muslim world and wreaked havoc in the West. Vaporizing Malala’s would-be killers into identity-free “those” crosses the line from “best foot forward” to “misleading.”

That is not the only thing that makes me uneasy

I’m also uncomfortable with the guidebook’s soft sell to children on the hijab. One book recommended to elementary level children is “Hats of Faith,” which features nine different head coverings linked to Christians, Jews, Sikhs and other groups, and which suggests that the hijab is identical in principle to these other forms of head gear.

But it isn’t.

Head coverings in most other cultures arise organically over time, and may or may not be linked to a belief system or to modesty. But the hijab is a modern invention, and only came into common usage with the Iranian revolution of 1979, when it was imposed on women, and even girls in primary school, to embody Iran’s turn from a West-friendly nation to an Islamist, West-hostile nation.

Since then, the hijab, as well as the niqab, although worn by some women for modesty, has been widely acknowledged to signal a commitment to political Islam amongst significant numbers of hijabis. The hijab has also featured as the trigger in honour-motivated crimes against girls and women, most tragically here in the 2007 death of teenager Aqsa Parvez, whose refusal to wear the hijab sparked the family plot that led to her death.

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It is therefore disingenuous to suggest that the hijab is as anodyne an accessory as a kippah or an African turban.

Normalizing the hijab for young girls, as it happens, is a “thing” in children’s literature, a topic I have been researching for the past few months. I was particularly disturbed by a Canadian book called *Tilt Your Head, Rosie the Red*, targeting seven and eight year olds, in which an independent young girl who likes to wear superhero capes (feminist empowerment), turns her cape into a hijab for a day so a Muslim girl in her class wearing a hijab won’t feel excluded. I would have liked the book if the young Muslim girl had tried turning her hijab (female disempowerment) into a

superhero cape for a day in return, but that didn't happen.

By the way, that book was written by Rosemary McCarney, Canada's Permanent Representative to the UN for Global Affairs. Perhaps McCarney's next so-politically correct gig can be chief executive officer — or rather, managing executive officer — of the TDSB.

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