

Barbara Kay: Canadians don't need a 'National Day' scolding us for being Islamophobic

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The federal government has been asked by the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) to declare Jan. 29, the first anniversary of a murderous attack on a Quebec mosque that left six dead and several others injured, a "National Day of Remembrance and Action on Islamophobia."

The word Islamophobia is something of a trigger to some of us, as NCCM knows well. The group was instrumental in the wording of Motion 103, where inclusion of "Islamophobia" sparked a passionate national debate (including over the potential to suppress criticism of Islam or certain Islamic people or groups if the same wording were to show up someday in law). When M-103 backers refused to consider replacing Islamophobia with the more precise "anti-Muslim," it alarmed Canadians concerned with free-speech erosion, including more than a few staunchly pluralistic Muslims.

Recall as well that NCCM presided over this definition of Islamophobia for the Toronto District School Board's guidebook to Islamic Heritage Month: "Islamophobia refers to fear, prejudice, hatred or dislike directed against Islam or Muslims, or towards Islamic politics or culture." Yet "Islamic politics or culture" is almost infinitely elastic in principle. Once the telling phrase came to public attention, attracting forceful criticism that embarrassed the TDSB, the definition was narrowed.

People place candles at a memorial two days after the fatal shooting spree at a Quebec City mosque on Jan. 29, 2017. Alice Chiche/AFP/Getty Images

Third time lucky? Give NCCM full marks for political perseverance, but in its proposal for a National Day of Remembrance and Action on Islamophobia neither the word "action" nor "Islamophobia" can be defended as politically innocent. Before an official "day" sweeps to fruition on a wave of sentiment, we should carefully assess our criteria for what such days signify.

The mosque attack was similar to the 1979 Montreal Massacre of 14 women. Both were the work of a lone gunman, with no known links to any particular ideology or organized group. Both were inspired by the killer's hatred of an identifiable group. Neither event suggests a pattern (there was no precedent, nor has there been a sequel to the Montreal massacre). Both resulted in the transmutation of an isolated incident into a symbol of systemic hatred.

In the Montreal massacre's wake, killer Marc Lépine's rampage was elevated into the gender equivalent of Kristallnacht. A National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women emerged on a wave of emotion, producing an alarmist narrative in which every woman is a potential victim of ubiquitous male violence, with every man a potential Lépine.

More than 1,000 people attend a Jan. 30, 2017 candlelight vigil on Parliament Hill for the victims of the Quebec mosque attack. Julie Oliver/Postmedia

The truth is, Canada is neither misogynistic nor tolerant of violence against women. Intimate partner violence here is rooted in individual experience and psychology, not culture. The White Ribbon campaign raised awareness of male-on-female violence, but ignored male victimhood of partner violence, which is nonetheless statistically significant. Hundreds of women's shelters dot the Canadian landscape thanks in part to awareness created by White Ribbon, but until recently there wasn't a single funded men's shelter anywhere. The national day's message is that women's suffering is the state's concern. Men's suffering, not. Many Canadian men (and the women in their lives) deeply resent the national day and its inherent gender bias.

We don't know why the mosque killer chose Muslims as objects of his savage hatred. Alleged perpetrator Alexandre Bissonnette was not charged with terrorism, nor has he apparent ties to violence-promoting groups. We do know one thing: he no more represents widespread Canadian attitudes toward Muslims than Marc Lépine represented Canadian attitudes to women. But an official Day of Remembrance focused on Muslim victimhood would receive funding to

perpetuate in schools and other institutions the notion that Muslims are systemically targeted for hatred.

Solemn official commemorations have a common theme: Remembrance Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day and 9/11 memorials draw citizens together to heal national historic wounds inflicted by collective political deviancy. They strengthen our sense of national purpose. Random acts of individual violence, whatever their motivation, should be commemorated, of course, but privately and organically, lest they become ideologically agenda-driven and divisive, as happened with the Montreal Massacre.

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The mosque murders were horrific. We rightly deplore them, while honouring the memory of the innocent victims. Nevertheless, an annual day of national atonement and commitment to a campaign dedicated to eradicating specifically anti-Muslim bigotry sends Canadians the wrong message. If six Jews had been killed in a synagogue by a lone bigot, I would hold the same view. Yes, anti-Semitism is a serious issue, but Canada is not an inherently anti-Semitic country, and I would not wish for Canadians to be ritually compelled to assent to that falsehood.

The Trudeau government should give the dubious NCCM's latest bid to secure special speech protection for Islam via the now-toxic word "Islamophobia" a polite, but firm pass. A political albatross, even when cooked over the hot coals of naiveté and good intentions is, I am assured, a most unpalatable electoral appetizer.