

Barbara Kay: Burka bans are about fear, not religion

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Not for the first time, I must take issue with my colleague Chris Selley's [occluded interpretation](#) of why burka-haters get "pretty crazy about that issue," as he says in his latest commentary, "Message in a bottle."

Selley was commenting on a stunt pulled by Sun TV's David "The Menzoid" Menzies, in which a 14-year old boy was filmed successfully buying liquor at three LCBO outlets while garbed in full Islamic-style covering, including his face. Reactions on the Internet varied between charges of Islamophobia and charges of silliness.

While admitting that he is "oversimplifying hugely," Selley contends that the basic argument amongst Canadians boils down to the left's insistence on Muslims' right to wear the veil, "while the right wants to take that right away (on grounds of 'liberating' Muslim women)."

As one on the right who has often argued for a ban on face covering while giving or receiving services in any tax-funded institution (which would include LCBOs), I do not accept that division, even in an elaborated version. I am sure I represent the majority opinion on the right when I say that this issue is not about Muslims at all, and that it doesn't matter whether there are a "miniscule number" of face veils in Canada (he is wrong about that – he simply doesn't wander around the areas in which they are becoming more prevalent), or whether there are thousands.

The issue is whether citizens in an open society have the right to cover their face when dealing with their fellow citizens in official or quasi-official settings. (Please do not bother writing to me about ski masks and surgical masks; situational cover for real and pressing reasons is not what we are talking about here).

It just so happens that the only examples of face cover worn on a regular basis are those covering the faces of Muslim women. But those of us who oppose face cover don't care whether they are Muslims, Hutterites, Raelians or atheists; we hate face cover, period. And as for "liberating" Muslim women, that is something I would like to see, but it is not the reason behind my disgust with face cover.

If a young man in a ski mask had walked into those liquor stores, he not only would not have been served, the clerk would probably have reached for the security button. Nobody in our society – certainly no male – presently gets away with face cover in situations where anonymity is associated with menace.

But "menace" is not an easily definable feeling. A bank teller would feel menaced by a man in a mask for obvious reasons. But ordinary citizens also feel menaced by masks. If Muslim women chose to wear robes of fur in summertime for so-called religious reasons, it would make me feel physically uncomfortable, but not menaced. But face cover does convey menace to me. It makes me psychologically anxious. I am known to the faceless person, but she – or he – is not known to me. That is not the way free people interact in a healthy society.

Quebec's proposed partial face-cover ban, which sadly has not yet become law, and there is some question as to whether it will, hit exactly the right note. It was not "a bit crazy" at all, as Selley says. It was eminently sensible. Unlike the European bans, which would remove all veils from the public forum, the Quebec ban would only have banned face cover in government-supported institutions. It would have removed the necessity for asking women to take off their veils in situations exactly like this LCBO one, where the three clerks apparently decided they might be accused of Islamophobia for doing their job of identifying the purchaser's age. Under the proposed Quebec law, the decision would have been taken out of their hands; they would have had to demand removal of the veil.

Selley is a libertarian, a position I respect for its consistency. But if I were a libertarian, and I took the position that it is the right of Muslim women to cover their faces, only revealing them where there is a pressing need to identify them for age or security purposes, then in the interest of intellectual consistency, I would have to defend the right of any citizen to cover his or her face for any reason at all, as long as they identified themselves in the appropriate circumstances. To a libertarian, any motive but intention to do harm should be admissible.

Equality before the law is a basic tenet of a free society. We must get beyond this idea that this face-cover debate is about religion. It isn't. It's about protecting the fragile social and psychological contract people agree to in an open society.

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