

Barbara Kay on Rona Ambrose: When the sisterhood attacks its own

Friday September 28th, 2012



I don't understand militant feminists. They keep saying they want to have more women in politics. You'd think they'd show respect for the minority of women who actually do make it to the top of the heap through their own merit. Even if feminists don't always agree with the opinions of such women, the larger point is surely to ensure that strong women of character are heard in the corridors of power.

Surely not, it would seem.

Rona Ambrose, minister for the status of women, dared to vote her conscience on Motion 312 — a private member's bill endorsing the creation of a committee that would define when human life begins — and was immediately attacked by a number of high-profile feminists. Deputy NDP leader Libby Davies, for instance, effectively excommunicated Ambrose from woman-dom for the crime of apostasy: "As the minister responsible for the status of women, I think there's a very clear expectation that [Ms. Ambrose] will uphold the rights of women in this country. . . . She showed that she wasn't prepared to do that yesterday by the way she voted."

Another, Gail Robinson, director of the University Health Network's Women's Mental Health Program, says Ms. Ambrose should be "particularly ashamed" because of her status of women title. But as a Post editorial board member responded, "Ashamed? For what? Voting her conscience on one of the most important bioethical issues facing humanity?"

Ms. Ambrose was very precise about her reasons for her vote: "I have repeatedly raised concerns about discrimination of girls by sex-selection abortion," she tweeted. "No law needed, but we need awareness."

The haughty self-righteousness of Ms. Ambrose's detractors is insufferable when one considers the devotion of Ms. Ambrose to the concerns, misery and occluded rights of those women from patriarchal, misogynistic cultures who are most in need of feminist support.

I have seen Ms. Ambrose's empathy for these girls and women close up and personal. Last spring, Ms. Ambrose helped to organize an Ottawa launch for a memoir I co-wrote with a Canadian woman born and raised in India, Aruna Papp. Papp is a counsellor and advocate for South Asian girls and women trapped in the same repressive honour/shame family dynamics she experienced, a closed cultural box from which it is difficult to escape.

Ms. Ambrose's motivation for helping us was to raise awareness amongst her political peers about the issues that Aruna's life story illustrated. She wanted other politicians to be aware that the cultural subjugation of women does not disappear when they arrive in Canada, but often persists into the second and even third generations. Such girls and women need intervention to break the cycle, and Ms. Ambrose has made it her personal mission to advance that process.

Accompanying Aruna to the launch was a young Toronto Muslim woman whom Aruna had been counselling and mentoring. The girl, K., insisted she wanted to tell her story personally to Ms. Ambrose. It was not a pretty tale. Her parents had taken her to Pakistan when she was 16, ostensibly to attend a family wedding, but in reality to force her marriage to a cousin so she could bring his family to Canada. She refused and was punitively raped by her kinsman, coming back to Canada in disgrace, then forcibly confined in her home for months, enduring daily threats of death. She escaped and was placed in a safe house. But the trauma has taken a terrible mental toll. (Recently, she attempted suicide.)

In short, K is exactly the sort of woman whom feminists should be supporting (instead of spending their time perversely demanding the unmitigated right of Canadian parents to kill girl fetuses in the womb).

We arrived early at the launch, as did Ms. Ambrose. She and K went off to a corner to talk. Ms. Ambrose's eyes never left the girl's face, which was soon wet with tears. It is the politician's art to bond with everyone who approaches them, of course — but in this case, I saw clear physical evidence that K's story had resonated with the minister on a very personal level. I could see how genuinely moved she had become.

Rona Ambrose is a better feminist than the women who criticize her. She is one of the few people in power who is not afraid to call out culturally-motivated misogyny. The so-called feminists who upbraid her on the abortion file have made a pact with an intellectual devil. They have sold their feminist souls,

repeatedly and pointedly ignoring the travails of their sisters from regions where women are devalued, in order to maintain the by- now corroded principle of unregulated and uninterrogated abortion.

Any woman who defies the feminists' dogma on abortion gets long rhetorical knives in the back. But these faux feminists should know that Ms. Ambrose is made of sterner stuff than the male politicians they are used to cowing.

National Post

Barbara Kay - Columnist