

Barbara Kay: The courage of Malala Yousufzai is an opportunity to build on

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Every politician hopes that events in the news will serve to maximize public awareness of their policy initiatives. But some news coincidences they would happily forego.

Yesterday Minister for Status of Women Rona Ambrose launched celebrations in Edmonton in advance of the first ever International United Nations-sponsored Day of the Girl, which will take place tomorrow, October 11. The theme is: “Strong Girls, Strong Canada: Leaders from the Start.”

At the very same time as Ms. Ambrose was marking the official debut of this worthy project, across the world in the once cosmopolitan, now chaotic and battle-ravaged Swat valley region of Pakistan, a young girl, a strong girl, and a “leader from the start” was shot in the head for daring to exercise those virtues in an area under Taliban domination. In serious condition, the young activist was helicoptered to safety in a military hospital in Peshawar.

Writing under a pseudonym, fourteen-year old [Malala Yousufzai](#), a profile in courage if ever there was one, had criticized Taliban atrocities and their persecution of anyone who educated girls. On a BBC blog she started when just eleven years old, Malala stood up for the right of girls to be educated. She wrote about not wearing her uniform to school to avoid attention from the fundamentalists who disapproved of education for girls, and of her supportive family being virtual prisoners in their home after dark.

A year ago Malala chaired a children’s assembly in collaboration with UNICEF, in which she championed a greater role for young people. For her bravery and determination, Malala was nominated by the Dutch organization KidsRights for their International Children’s Peace Prize.

A Taliban spokesman proudly claimed responsibility for the shooting, referring to Malala’s challenges as “a new chapter of obscenity.” But in a country where brutality against girls and women is a commonplace, this particularly disproportional retaliation proved to be a tipping point, rallying outraged Pakistanis across the nation. Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf added his condemnation to a chorus of shocked and angry voices from Malala’s family and supporters.

Canada was quick to respond to the attack. Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird stated, “Our shared humanity requires those who cherish freedom to speak clearly and with one voice: this type of savage violence and repression will not be tolerated.”

Malala did not set out to become a martyr for the rights of girls. But she must have known that there was a good possibility that she could be harmed for her gender heresies. When senseless tragedies of this kind strike, it is something of a cliché to find a redeeming consolation in them. In this case, it would not be an act of cynicism for Ms. Ambrose to exploit the ironic coincidence between the horrific attack on this heroic girl in Pakistan, and the debut of The International Day of the Girl.

Ms. Ambrose has made it her business to become more aware of culturally-motivated abuse of girls and women than any of her political predecessors. She has been pro-active in raising consciousness on the issue. It is thanks to Ms. Ambrose that two new projects will receive funding amounting to \$325,000 for projects that will empower Muslim girls and women “to overcome barriers and to become leaders in their community,” and that will “assist girls and young women from diverse ethno-cultural communities to maximize opportunities and participate fully in Canadian society.”

The name and story of Malala Yousufzai should be enshrined in the literature and the programs offered in these new projects. Every Canadian girl, but especially those from regions of the world where family dynamics are rooted in a patriarchal cultural matrix of honour and shame, where the dhimmitude of girls and women is taken for granted, must understand that there is nothing inevitable or eternal about negative family dynamics that are rooted in female-unfriendly concepts of honour and shame. They must understand that such a values matrix can be unravelled and reversed in countries where girls are highly valued and support for their dignity is available to them by law and by custom. Malala’s lionhearted endeavours must never be forgotten. She is in spirit and should be in fact the “poster girl” for the International Day of the Girl.

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