

With Parliament's passage in late March of Motion 103, which condemned "Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination," the Canadian Heritage Committee was tasked with a study to determine "what Canadians have to say" on the motion. Now underway, formal hearings are revealing what polls have already made clear: many Canadians find M-103 disturbing.

They dislike it because it singles out one religion for special consideration and because they don't believe Canada is a systemically hateful nation. But they particularly fear its implications, as the principals behind M-103 — proposer MP Iqra Khalid, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Heritage Minister Melanie Joly, and Muslim community spokespeople — keep balking when called on to define "Islamophobia."

(Feeding that fear: until B'nai Brith expressed public concern Monday, the newly-released Toronto District School Board's Islamic Heritage Month Guidebook — citing input from some of the same actors engaged in promoting M-103 — defined Islamophobia as "fear, prejudice, hatred or dislike directed against Islam or Muslims, or towards Islamic politics or culture." "Islam"? "Islamic politics or culture"? According to a TDSB representative, this ghastly mile-wide definition was chosen "in error." Please, TDSB, a little respect for Canadians' intelligence.)

Hearings began in June. Anti-M-103 activists, noting that the Liberals were allowed to call 36 witnesses, the NDP 12 and the Conservative Party 24, wondered if the fix was in for M-103 opposers.

They were not heartened by Heritage Committee chairperson Hedy Fry's on-record comment: "There is no guarantee that radical voices won't speak at M-103 hearings." So far, pro-M-103 voices predictably toe the Liberal party line that racism and Islamophobia are serious problems in Canada. What Fry might call "radical voices" have raised sensible, compelling challenges to this assumption, and have expressed concerns this kind of motion could eventually lead to politicians creating laws that further limit free speech.

On Sept 20, Toronto Sun columnist Tarek Fatah (himself a victim of oppressive speech codes in his native Pakistan) testified that discouraging or limiting criticism of Islam would, in effect, most harm those secular or free-thinking Muslims who came to Canada precisely for the freedom to speak their mind to Islamic authority figures as they could not do in their countries of origin. In any case, "You cannot define (Islamophobia)," he charged, "because the word is a fraud." According to Fatah, these bold challenges earned him such frosty treatment from "the phalanx of Liberal MPs" and "haranguing" from Fry that one MP contacted him later to apologize for the "intimidation and bullying" he had experienced.

On Sept. 27, all four individuals who testified opposed M-103.

Father Raymond J. de Souza (speaking for himself, not the Catholic Church) said it was unwise to single out any one religion, and that government should encourage theological exchange rather than impede it.

Peter Bhatti, Chair of International Christian Voice, noted that his brother was murdered in Pakistan for daring to protect Christian lives from that country's suffocating blasphemy laws. Bhatti said anxiety over the vagueness of the term "Islamophobia" was creating distress amongst Canada's Pakistani Christians, who see M-103 as being tantamount to a repressive blasphemy law.

Jay Cameron, a lawyer with the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, denounced M-103's linkage of the word "quell" to "climate of hate and fear," as "quell" is a word normally reserved for policing riots, not words (excellent point). "Racism is something you can't legislate against, per se, because it begins in the mind," he pointed out.

Raheel Raza, president of the reform-oriented Council for Muslims Facing Tomorrow, asked, "Why are only Muslims

mentioned by name?” and, “It’s not the government’s responsibility to babysit just one community.” She suggested that instead of the government deflecting attention from retrograde Islamic behaviours like honour killings and polygamy, Canada should take a leadership role in encouraging a return to a “free thinking” model of Islam, once a widespread norm.

The Liberals were back-footed by these forcefully argued dissents. Various Liberal MPs tried to “explain” the motion, muddying the “Islamophobia” waters further and monopolizing so much time that Conservative MP David Anderson accused them of “filibustering their time.”

One witness who earned the right to testify was shunted to “standby” status as a replacement in the unlikely event of a dropout. Major (Ret’d) Russ Cooper is a highly decorated combat veteran of the first Gulf War, recognized by the Air Force for courage and leadership in his role. The M-103 pushback campaign was kicked off by Cooper’s national anti-M-103 petition drive, which garnered 27,000 signatures and was then leveraged by other outlets to gain 200,000 signatures. Cooper’s prepared testimony to the hearings, which may never be heard formally, is a model of reason, clarity and high intelligence. You can read it in an online Canadian Heritage Committee briefing note. And the pith of his argument can be viewed on this concise YouTube video.

Stay tuned. Far from the slam-dunk feel-goody gesture it was meant to be, M-103 is looking more and more like a pivotal political and cultural moment in Canadian history.

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