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Canada's sorry record of abandoning fathers

By Barbara Kay

If you live in the Chatham, Ont., region, be warned that today you may happen upon a purple Barney Mobile full of scary characters like Batman, The Incredible Hulk and Wonder Woman.

Kidding. The Barney Mobile characters aren't the least bit scary. They're just ordinary dads and moms from the Fathers 4 Justice movement (F4J), presently touring Canada in support of MP Maurice Vellacott's private member's motion (PMM 483) that seeks to enshrine the principle of equal parenting (absent extraordinary circumstances) as the default legal option in the event of divorce. Spider-Man on a roof, The Incredible Hulk atop a construction crane, Batman and Robin scaling a bridge: The F4J objective is to attract maximum publicity with an ironic touch and minimal public inconvenience. F4J has staged over a hundred superhero "protests," none of which have caused physical harm to people or property.

Walter Fox is the go-to Toronto criminal lawyer for F4J dads in legal trouble. He is presently defending several activists on charges laid after two non-violent August superhero actions. "Toronto's version of a terrorist is a middle-aged man in a Batman outfit," Fox scoffs, referring to Toronto's disproportionate reaction - Emergency Task Force swarmings, streets being cordoned off, jailings and association bans - a stark contrast to the bemused, non-confrontational reactions to F4J stunts by security forces in other Canadian cities such as Regina, Vancouver and St John. York University sociology professor Rob Kenedy - Canada's only academic with expertise in the fathers' rights movement - has interviewed 200 activists in the field for a book he is writing on the subject of equal parenting. He deplores Toronto's spirit-breaking, "villainizing" tactics.

F4J's instantly recognizable comic-book icons were chosen, Kenedy adds, precisely because they remind the world that Superman and Spider-Man are fictional guardians of society's most vulnerable. The symbolism is apt because in real life loving fathers are superheroes to their children.

The Barney Mobile tour, which ends in Ottawa on Oct. 7, promotes a simple message: Fathers have the natural and moral right to love and be loved by their children. As credible studies show, that can only happen by spending equal, or near-equal, time with them.

In our outmoded adversarial family-law system, women win sole custody in over 85% of contested cases. To believe this is a fair outcome that truly addresses "the best interests of the child" (once a worthy ideal, but over the years hollowed out into a meaningless mantra, cynically deployed to defend mothers' entitlements), you would also have to believe that mothers are more valuable to children than fathers, or that fathers are inherently inferior at parenting, or that women are morally superior to men. As it happens, many ideologues do profess and promote all these beliefs. Because these ideologues are overrepresented in the legal and academic communities from which policy advisors are disproportionately drawn - and because they are

politically aggressive - they have successfully chilled rational public discourse that would inevitably lead to long overdue reform.

Polls indicate that 80% of Canadians approve of equal parenting. Study after study points to the deleterious social effects on children in households where the father is mostly or completely absent.

Our family court system is “a national shame,” according to University of British Columbia sociology professor Edward Kruk, Canada’s foremost authority on custody and its outcomes. “It is a form of child abuse,” Kruk says, “to have a fit and loving parent forcefully removed by a court in the absence of any child protection concerns.”

After children’s infancy, men can parent as capably and responsibly as women. Almost three million North American men are raising children solo, and the sun still rises in the east. In a growing number of U.S. states, such as Maine and Iowa, equal parenting is now the rule. In Australia, a country not unlike Canada in demography and socioeconomic indicators, the law stipulates that joint custody will prevail if parents can’t agree to custody arrangements.

Why, then, does socially enlightened Canada have one of the highest father-removal rates in the world? Why were we so ahead of the curve in feeling the pain of homosexual lovers denied a band of gold, but remain so far behind the curve in feeling the pain of heterosexual fathers denied their own flesh and blood?

Politicians of all parties must get on board the Barney Mobile and lend their support to PMM 483. The time for custody justice is now.

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