

More SpongeBob, Harper and same-sex debate

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And that's a very tough claim, since we're almost two years into allowing same sex marriages in Canada, with no signs of social collapse.

[VICTORIA](#) - I've got to figure out how to apologize to my young friend Spencer for the terrible thing I've done, while innocently thinking we were just going to the movies.

We picked the SpongeBob SquarePants Movie. And now I learn, too late, that I may have inadvertently exposed an impressionable young person to images of . . . tolerance.

The horror. A very bright person like Spencer, encouraged to be tolerant of people who may be different. The warning of SpongeBob's evil complicity came from James Dobson, the head of a big U.S.-based religious group called Focus on the Family, which thinks there is entirely too much talk of this tolerance stuff.

People pay attention to Dobson. His radio show draws about seven million listeners, and he's credited with helping George Bush to critical wins in Florida and Ohio. (If the group sounds familiar, it may be because you heard about it during Cindy Silver's unsuccessful bid for a Liberal nomination; Silver was Focus on the Family's former legal advisor in Canada.)

Posted by

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To be fair, Dobson didn't really have it in for SpongeBob. But the amiable, squeaky-voiced cartoon megastar appeared with Barney, Bob the Builder, Big Bird and all the heavyweights in a video going out to schools for Family Day in March, promoting diversity and understanding. (Nile Rodgers, who wrote "We Are Family, I've Got All My Sisters With Me," helped create the video through a foundation that he started after 9-11 to teach kids about diversity.)

Bad idea, says Dobson. Tolerance is just another word hijacked by homosexuals.

And just look at the foundation's tolerance pledge, he adds. "To help keep diversity a wellspring of strength and make America a better place for all, I pledge to have respect for people whose abilities, beliefs, culture, race, sexual identity or other characteristics are different from my own," the pledge says.

Okay, I admit that it doesn't seem that evil. Are we supposed to disrespect some of those people? Does that mean we get to hit them, or do we have to be content with shunning?

Which leads, perhaps in a slightly twisting way, to Conservative leader Stephen Harper.

The Conservatives just wrapped up a caucus meeting here in Victoria, and tolerance was much on the agenda. Harper and Prime Minister Paul Martin - meeting on the other coast with his caucus - lobbed long-distance grenades at each other about same sex marriage.

Or they did for a while. I made it to a midday scrum at the Empress Hotel on the second day of the visit.

Harper wanted to talk about Jean Chretien's attempts to derail the Gomery inquiry into the sponsorship scandal. He didn't want to talk about same sex marriage. I had my head down, taking notes, when a reporter asked two questions on the issue.

When I looked up Harper was gone, bolting from the room.

I like to think Harper was embarrassed.

People may feel strongly about the issue. But ultimately, it's no big deal.

The question is whether governments issue a piece of paper that uses the word marriage to same sex couples. They don't get any new rights, or financial advantages. No one is compelled to do anything, or even recognize the marriage. It's all about a piece of paper.

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What a choice. Dobson and Harper, or SpongeBob and Paul Martin.

Spencer and I, we want to hear about some real issues.

Footnote: The latest rallying cry from opponents is that churches will somehow be forced to marry same sex couples. It is a patently phony argument, with the right of churches to act in accord with their principles firmly entrenched in the constitution. No opponent has been able to point to a case in which that principle has been over-ridden by the courts.