

Fears of 'anti-Catholic' attitudes heading into federal election

Anti-Catholic sentiment is "alive and well" as Canadians head into a federal election, warns the president of the Catholic Civil Rights League.

The comments by Phil Horgan were echoed by other Catholic advocates in the wake of recent criticism of Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, a Catholic, particularly on the issues of abortion and traditional marriage.

Premier Jason Kenney, a Catholic, faced similar attacks last spring during Alberta's election.

Liberal Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale last month unearthed a 2005 video of Scheer opposing the redefinition of marriage. He released it on Twitter, along with this message: "To be a leader for all Canadians, the Conservative Party leader should now end his lifelong boycott of Pride events and explain whether he would still deny same-sex couples the right to marry, as he said in Parliament."

As Canada heads to the polls Oct. 21, Horgan finds the tone of Goodale's comments alarming.

"Scratch the criticisms slightly and it exposes a far more distressing concern that anti-Catholicism is alive and well in Canada," he said.

"The fact that the media continues to advance these arguments further discloses that the truly acceptable prejudice in Canada remains anti-Catholicism."

In the run-up to the election, Archdiocese of Toronto will be hosting a Federal Election Debate from a Catholic Perspective debate Oct. 3 at the John Bassett Theatre at the Metro Convention Centre in Toronto.

The event will be moderated by veteran television journalist Don Newman and introduced by Cardinal Thomas Collins. It's the first time the archdiocese has held an event of this magnitude centred on an election.



Ambassador Andrew Bennett

Meanwhile, Canada's former ambassador of religious freedom, Andrew Bennett, said attacks on the religious beliefs of any political candidate are unacceptable.

"I think it's thoroughly disreputable that any party would attack anybody for what they hold to be true, whether moral beliefs or religious beliefs," said Bennett, the director of the Cardus Religious Freedom Institute.

"If we are going to enjoy a genuine common life as Canadians we have to be willing to recognize deep differences in our society and people are going to believe different things.

"Not only that, but we need – if we truly believe in religious freedom – we need to expect that our public figures, our political leaders, have as much right as anyone else to live both publicly and privately according to their deepest-held beliefs."

Bennett sees the attacks on Scheer in the same light as Quebec's secularism law banning the wearing of religious symbols in public by public servants, police officers, teachers, judges and other representatives of the state.

In a recent campaign appearance in the province, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, a Sikh, was shown without his turban.

"The law on secularism in Quebec is an absolute affront not only to religious freedom but also to the promotion and development of our common life," said Bennett.

"In the upcoming election, one thing we have to be very clear on in

this debate on what is acceptable in terms of open expressions of faith is that the Quebec approach is the wrong approach, because it marginalizes people of deep religious conviction and it enforces this closed secularist view as the only acceptable belief system is secularism. And secularism is not neutral.”

Horgan said attacks on Scheer and other prominent politicians seem to “suggest that the underlying message is that Catholics or others need not apply for high public office, or perhaps that Catholics need not apply for any public office, or that Catholics or others should check their religiously formed beliefs based on natural law principles at the door of the public square, in order to participate in public debate.”

“Is the new normal that even in circumstances where a politician’s public position is made known, that his private faith adherence excludes him from office?” Horgan asked. “Are we excluding people of faith from public life?”

Bennett sees a parallel with what John Kennedy faced before he was elected as the United States’ first Catholic president amid criticism that “he would somehow do the pope’s bidding.”

“We’re seeing a version of that in attacks on Andrew Scheer’s Catholicism,” Bennett said.

“They’re not attacking Jagmeet Singh for being Sikh,” said Alissa Golob, co-founder of pro-life lobby group It Starts Right Now. “That would be considered racist, bigotry. But it’s perfectly acceptable to attack Andrew’s Catholic beliefs.”

Meanwhile, Campaign Life Coalition has removed its voter guide from its website in response to changes to Elections Canada rules.

This is the first time in the 37-year history of the organization that its voter guide has not been made public, said Jack Fonseca, director of political operations for Campaign Life.

A law passed late last year has “put extreme and onerous regulatory requirements” on any organization using its website, engaging in public debate, putting up candidate ratings or voter guides that are deemed by Elections Canada to be a partisan activity, said Fonseca said.

The new rules muzzle organizations that spend more than \$500 to publicly engage on issues that will be debated in the upcoming election, whether they name a political party or not.

The CLC guide will be available to CLC’s private database of over 200,000 supporters across Canada if they register at CLC’s website but “obviously our reach will be lessened,” Fonseca said.

