



Reflections from an anti-choice “education” session

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I’ve always loved learning. One of my favorite things to do as a child was go to my local library. I would peruse the stacks for hours, enthralled by all the things there were to know. Back in June, I got quite an education.

I attended a local ‘training’ session put on by the anti-choice group RightNow. Calgary was one of the stops on their Operation 50 tour, held at the Fish Creek Public Library. Their purpose is to replace 50 pro-choice MPs with anti-choice MPs, the ultimate goal being 170 anti-choice MPs to challenge the Criminal Code and outlaw abortion in Canada.

The library booking is a last-minute switch after a community centre in Marda Loop prudently decided against hosting the event. The sudden change in venue results in a bit of a bumpy start, but our hosts are congenial, and I hear comments about how ‘persecution is just a part of the righteousness of their cause.’ I help them set up their chairs.

As folks trickle in, soothing piano music plays, and it feels like an afternoon church social, rather than a calculated effort to deprive vulnerable women and gender-diverse people of their personal freedoms. I shake hands and make polite small talk with the elderly couple next to me. I hear lots of chatter about how important it is to change the laws, and self-congratulations by those who actively work to limit the rights of others.

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Outside the walls of this glass room are hundreds of books. Great works of literature, reason, science, and philosophy. Inside this room, we are setting back reproductive rights more than 50 years.

There is a reporter and cameraman present, apparently CBC Français is doing a feature on our host Alissa, and has been following her across the country as she peddles misinformation to community groups and high schools. Your tax dollars at work, folks.

The event begins nearly 30 minutes late, due to the change in venue, but largely so RightNow can playact for the cameras. We all watch as a handful of young adults enact a staged entrance, where they are warmly greeted, and Alissa introduces herself. These are people she already knows. They volunteer locally, holding fetal gore signs on street corners, and distributing propaganda. So much for honesty and transparency in the media.

They also film the young people signing the door-knocking pledge, just to show how simple and accessible it is. It reminds me of signing a sexual purity pledge at their age, the result of another national movement to frighten teens into something else they don't fully understand.

Ultimately, there are approximately 50 attendees, and it is standing room only. The crowd is well-dressed, mostly older, and predominantly white. I sit near a former classmate I haven't seen in 25 years. Back then, he won the science fair. Now he harasses Indigenous activists online.

When there is a lull in the chatter, the voices of kids can be heard from the play area below. Isn't that why we're in this room, after all? To save the babies? I'm thinking of those kids, too. Will they grow up in a world that is just? Or in a world where their choices define them. Where consequences are arbitrary and enforced by others. When the time comes, will they be free to make a choice? Or are we here to create laws that will imprison their bodies and limit them from actively participating in their own lives?

One of our hosts is Cameron Coté, a geneticist who works for the transphobic Canadian Centre for Bioethical Reform. Have you seen the protestors with the fetal gore signs on street corners, at malls and high schools? Or the "Calgary Truth Truck" that drives around Calgary like a giant revolting billboard for ignorance? That's the CCBR. Their self-confessed mandate is to literally disgust Canadians into outlawing abortion. If you look into the story behind those photos, it is a fascinating tale of literal dumpster-diving, religious pearl-clutching, and the deliberate propagation of misinformation.

Cam is well-dressed and passionate about his topic, though the whole session reads like a pitch for an MLM or timeshares in Punta Cana. We are essentially here to prevent the death of potential. The air of possibility is in the room, and it allows them to speak of the so-called "pre-born" as a homogenous group, just waiting to enter the world and make it a better place.

His slides contain statistics with no sources, and he is careful to interpret the information for us. He makes the outlandish claim that there are more abortions performed in Canada every year than any other medical procedure. I wonder how many times he had to practice saying this into the mirror before it didn't sound like an outright lie.

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He does some impressive soft-shoe around the Morgentaler verdict, telling us that the judges didn't really vote for what we think they voted for. When Cam speaks of abortion being decriminalized in 1969, a photo of a perspiring Pierre Trudeau appears on the screen. The elderly man sitting near me leans over to his wife and growls, "that's the devil."

Cam's main point is that abortion is a form of age-based discrimination. This statement brings nods and murmurs of support from the mostly over 50 crowd, and it is everything I can do to keep my jaw from hitting the floor. "Just because you don't have a brain yet doesn't mean you don't have any rights." It is a near-literal strawman argument. If I only had a brain.

Cam spends a good fifteen minutes repeating the lie that infants are frequently born alive during terminations and abandoned to die. 'Post-birth' abortion is both an oxymoron and a misnomer. He also spends time decrying MAID laws and assisted death, which is also on their agenda to repeal. Someone arrives late to the session with their toddler, and it reminds me of being raised with well-intentioned hate.

Cam hands the presentation over to Alissa Golob, one of the founders of the anti-choice group RightNow. Alissa is personable, well-versed in her content, and speaks with practiced ease, rather than urgency, confident that her time has come. Forgive me for being blunt, but if your mother considered aborting you, you are not an 'abortion survivor,' you are a choice. Don't use the choice someone made with you to then remove the choices of others.

Alissa describes her background in working to limit rights for women and gender-diverse folks, and the work she has done with different political campaigns to elect anti-choice candidates, including then-19-year-old homeschooler and anti-choice MPP Sam Oosterhoff. She founded RightNow with a colleague, with the express purpose of electing anti-choice candidates. RightNow identifies local candidates who are declaredly anti-choice and provides them with support, including a cadre of local volunteers and door-knockers.

The RightNow media and releases have all the diversity of a college brochure. Alissa walks us through their electoral successes and spends a good portion of time on the failures. "If we had just 4 more volunteers, this politician would have won."

RightNow has well-edited video clips and compelling music. Two blonde women read scripted testimonials of their involvement. The website refers to their supporter base as "diverse and inclusive." Forgive me if I don't believe you. There is no mention of the specific needs of gender diverse folks or communities of colour.

Alissa is well-versed in her talking points, gliding smoothly over potentially difficult content. "You don't have to discuss the issues with people, just get them to vote for our candidate." All that matters is that a candidate is 'pro-life,' we don't even need to bother with the rest of their opinions on that pesky policy stuff.

RightNow is well-funded and politically savvy, and they have done their research. Alissa mentions that they selected their local candidates more than 2 years ago, and have been coordinating to

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ensure they have as much support as possible. I was actually impressed by their level of organization. We could learn a lot from the militant right, it would seem.

When RightNow is door knocking, they primarily want to know if their candidate has support. Alissa made one statement I agree with. She said they aren't interested in changing people's minds. They are focusing on the people who don't vote much. Who are on the fence about reproductive rights. Who haven't done the research, and are ripe for convincing with a few contextless statistics. I'm not interested in changing minds, either. I am interested in candidates that will support ethical, evidence-based policies that empower, rather than restrict.

The RightNow website has a quote from Plato: “One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors.” Apparently those of us who believe in personal autonomy and choice are inferior.

RightNow's twitter feed talks about their community outreach, particularly in junior high and high schools. They post images of feedback forms from impressionable Grade 8 students who don't even realize that they have just been indoctrinated in a place reserved for learning.

When I was in junior high, they brought us little gold pins, allegedly the size of a fetus' feet at 10 weeks, and taught us about how 'babies' were being slaughtered and how important it is to save them. We knew nothing of sex, and even less of pregnancy. We stood out near the highway with gory signs, as though a blurry sign at 100 kph will make someone rethink their entire worldview.

The session frames abortion as a human rights issue. Sounds good, right? I would agree with that statement. But whose rights? Certainly not the Indigenous women who even today are having their children ripped from their homes, and experiencing forced sterilization. Not for the Black Women and women of colour who experience maltreatment during birth, resulting in lower infant mortality and negative parental health outcomes, due to systemic racism. Not for the transgender and gender-diverse individuals who experience discrimination and the regulation of their bodies by people who continue to deny their right to exist. These are human rights issues.

I realize that there is privilege entrenched in my perspective when writing this. Indigenous communities and people of colour, particularly Black women, have been experiencing loss of liberty and reproductive control for decades. Listen to their voices, their stories. Listen when they tell you what they need.

Vote.