

Opinion: Too many controversies for a museum?

BY DOMINIQUE CLÉMENT, EDMONTON JOURNAL OCTOBER 14, 2014 6:52 AM



Guests gather at the grand opening of the Canadian Museum For Human Rights in Winnipeg on Sept. 17. The museum needs to take a bolder stand, forcing us to debate the hard questions, writes Dominique Clement.

Photograph by: JOHN WOODS, THE CANADIAN PRESS/file

Canadians had their first glance at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights on Sept. 19. Ironically, a museum that has been plagued by controversy has ignored the most important controversy of all: What do human rights mean to Canadians?

As a member of the national advisory council, I have followed the evolution of this remarkable institution. It does not disappoint. The architecture is magnificent. It is truly inspiring. The first national museum to be built since 1967 is without question the most physically beautiful structure in Canada.

There have been many controversies surrounding the museum. Ukrainians have demanded greater recognition of the Holodomor. First Nations insist that the museum frame their experience as genocide. Each of these issues is addressed in the new museum. And yet there is not a single attempt to help Canadians understand their own rights culture.

Human rights is an historically new concept. Before the 1970s, Canadians were more likely to frame abuses as violations of Christian values or British justice. Now, it seems everything is a human right. Are your taxes too high? That's a rights violation. Is your school board providing poor services? Complain to the human rights commission!

The opening of this museum is a unique opportunity to engage Canadians in a dialogue around what human rights mean in this country.

The first gallery declares that human rights are those "rights and freedoms we have simply because we are human." A huge plaque at the entrance to the gallery on Canada explains that "human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Powerful rhetoric, to be sure, but hardly informative.

Such platitudes do little to enrich the conversation around the hard questions we face today: How far should we accommodate religious minorities? Are restrictions on hate speech a violation of free speech? Do we have a right to die through assisted suicide? These are serious debates, and governments are too often ignoring these hard questions.

Sadly, the museum has chosen to avoid confronting Canadians with the hard questions. None of the exhibits explore how human rights come into conflict. Instead, there are beautifully designed exhibits on Aboriginal peoples, genocide and famous events in Canadian history.

Rather than chronicle historical atrocities, the museum should be a space to debate the issues of the day. Is the criminal prohibition on solicitation a violation of the right to physical security? Should bullying be a human rights violation? Is it discrimination for Catholic schools to deny employment to people who are transgendered?

Canadians would be better equipped to debate these questions if they had a healthier understanding of their distinct rights culture. Here, again, the museum has failed to offer visitors a clear vision.

Canada has a unique rights culture based on its history. We are more tolerant of limiting individual rights for the collective. Quebec's language laws are only one example. Religious minorities have better protections here than, say, France. And we have the most sophisticated human rights legal regime in the world.

The CMHR offers no answer, only questions. Perhaps that is its greatest strength. On the other hand, the best museums challenge our comfort zones. If you don't believe me, visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

The museum needs to take a bolder stand. Challenge us. Force us to debate the hard questions while policy-makers avoid them.

It's a risky bet for a public institution. It will anger and upset people to be sure, and no museum wants

controversy. But we can handle it. Have faith.

Dominique Clément is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Alberta who specializes in human rights. A member of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights' National Advisory Council, he had an opportunity to view the entire museum in mid-September.

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