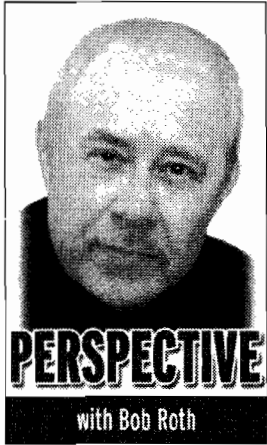


Were The Photographs Of Aborted Babies Too "Shocking?"

There are some issues that test the moral values of even the most conscientious people. Abortion is one of these.



The furor that has arisen over a recent anti-abortion demonstration in Cornwall underscores just how volatile - and divisive - this issue is.

I agree with many critics that the ugly photographs of aborted fetuses carried by the demonstrators was, to say the least, over the top - and the organizers of that demonstration, Show the Truth Canada, may wish to consider if such tactics serve their public relations goals. However, I will not join the knee-jerk reaction among some people who have called for a ban on such demonstrations and who actually called the police to see if they could put a

stop to the protest.

It is at times such as these that we find out who the real democrats are in our society and who really believes in freedom of speech and expression.

It has often been said that the only speech that needs defending is "unpopular" speech and I believe the demonstration in Cornwall clearly fits into this category. When we start banning photographs because they are "shocking" or "upsetting" or "offensive," we totally undermine the concept of free speech.

To suggest that "Show the Truth Canada" should be prevented from displaying these photographs is to set a precedent that would tear the very foundation out of protest. Often, the whole point of protest is to "shock" people - to rattle them from their easy chairs of complacency. Setting up "anti-shock" or "good-taste" standards creates a nightmare scenario where some back-room elite decides which expressions are "fit" for public view and which expressions must be "banned."

I don't always agree with the tactics of anti-abortion groups, but I have always defended their right to utilize those

tactics. These people have a valid viewpoint - whether you agree with it or not - that life begins at conception and, therefore, abortion is nothing short of government-sanctioned mass murder. To them, what is really "shocking" is that we tolerate these executions.

The photographs were displayed precisely to demonstrate the reality of what happens in an abortion clinic - Canada's most effective weapon of mass destruction. I am the first to admit that I don't like seeing pictures of aborted "babies" complete with fingers and toes. But I also have to admit, that no amount of research, rhetoric or rationale has impacted me as much as those photos. They do their job - and they do it well.

Many critics have used exposure to their children as the crux of their ban-the-photos attack - and I fully appreciate the dilemma and sympathize with parents who have raised this concern. How do we balance the right of freedom of expression with the need to protect children from potentially traumatic influences beyond their capability to comprehend?

If photos of bloody

fetuses upset some children, should the photos be banned? If paintings or depictions of the crucified Christ - with blood oozing from his hands and feet - upset some children, should these images also be banned?

Frankly, I can't find an easy answer to these questions. There is simply no pat formula. Sometimes, we just can't shelter our children from reality. The best we can do is explain it to them.

By the same token, I can't help wondering if some adults are using exposure to children as a convenient way to avoid their own unease at seeing the photographs. I know they make me uneasy. I always react negatively when shown such material - it is genuinely psychologically disturbing.

But, let's face it - there is no better way to "tell the truth" than by giving photographic evidence of exactly what is going on. Just because the "truth" offends people doesn't mean it should be banned.

Free speech and freedom of expression will shock, offend and, yes, even make people cry sometimes. Democracy isn't perfect. But it's still better than the alternative.