

The Charter of Québécois Values: A Socialist View From Inside Quebec

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Much ink has been spilled about the Charter of Québécois Values since it was announced last month by the Parti Québécois (PQ) minority government. Seldom has a social issue garnered so many reactions, from English Canada's moral high ground to the contemptuous "Jeannette Manifesto" signed by twenty prominent Québécois women in support of the charter. Opinion polls signal deep polarization: on one side, conservative religious believers and pro-charter seculars; on the other, anti-charter believers, open-minded seculars — and anglophones.

Progressives have almost unanimously condemned the charter as a racist, opportunistic move by a government surfing on a wave of xenophobia. This narrative is amply justified. After all, the PQ's branding of the charter as the "Charter of Québécois Values" is a far cry from rhetoric of the "nous inclusif" ("inclusive us") previously championed by the party's intellectuals. In resorting to nationalist rhetoric, the PQ purposely threw the debate off-course, and the Left followed suit. We followed the rules it set and debated the law, rather than the broader question of secularism. As socialists, we should not be too quick to dismiss the latter.

Secularism in Quebec

The Quebec Left has a long history of promoting secularism, going back to the 1960s and the Quiet Revolution, marked by a historic emancipation of Quebec institutions from the Catholic church and by the rise of a nationalist movement tied to socialist ideas. The debate over identity and collective values led to the conclusion that a new society, free from the influence of the church, must rise out of the post-war baby boom. At that time, the church was fostering persistent inequality between women and men; Premier Maurice Duplessis's anti-union, anti-communist regime was heavily reliant on the support of Québécois clergy. During the Quiet Revolution, secularism became a collective social project in itself.

Fifty years later, critics of the charter are quick to point out that two ostentatious religious symbols are officially relegated to the dusty cabinets of a "national heritage" that early supporters of the PQ fought against. The Catholic crosses in the National Assembly and on top of Montreal's Mount Royal will remain in place. Other inconsistencies abound. The charter's differentiated treatment of religious symbols solely on the basis of size, for instance, allows Catholic public-sector employees to wear small crosses while their Muslim or Jewish colleagues are forbidden from wearing hijabs or kippahs. The charter is only forced upon minority religions, and for a good reason: Bernard Drainville, Minister Responsible for Democratic Institutions, would like us to believe Montreal is on

the verge of “Islamization.”

It's a dangerous message, playing exclusively on division, stigmatization and prejudice. By opposing Quebec values — gender equality first, secularism second — to stereotypes hurled against the Muslim community, and the Muslim community exclusively, the PQ is adding fuel to the fire and reawakening old reactionary sentiments. Today's nationalists are turning their backs on the Quiet Revolution rather than continuing its work. They are promoting an idea of Quebec as a secular capitalist society like France, one that's allegedly threatened by Muslim immigrants, while also using anti-Muslim racism to appeal to people who identify with conservative Catholic values. English Canada's blatant display of anti-Quebec chauvinism has fed this kind of rhetoric, giving further credence to the self-portrayal of charter supporters as victims of the enemy within and without.

PQ strategy

What explains this move by the PQ? It's not difficult to explain when we consider the next provincial election.

One year ago, the PQ was elected on a thin minority: 54 seats to the Liberals' 50, after a particularly bad campaign. The party is now looking for a majority, and has calculated it can win one at the expense of the right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ). Accordingly, the PQ dropped the most left-leaning promises made in the wake of the 2012 student strike and has focused on a quick return to a balanced budget. This quickly backfired, as it was widely perceived as a betrayal. . The charter is strategy number two. The polarization of the debate panders to their nationalist base and rallies CAQ social conservatives, a recipe for electoral victory if not social cohesion.

Who will be the first victims of PQ cabinet minister Jean-François Lisée's clever electoral strategy? Contrary to what might be expected, it will be women. The pretence of feminism displayed in the \$1.9 million in publicity spending for the charter and the “Jeannette manifesto” is, at best, opportunistic. It consolidates the oft-dispelled perception that Quebec is a feminist heaven, and that the main threat to gender equality is non-Catholic religions. Worse, the charter will plunge one of the most oppressed social groups of Quebec society deeper into precariousness. On average, immigrant women in Quebec, many of them Muslim, earn 30% less than immigrant men. Their rate of unemployment is 50% higher than that of non-immigrant women. This disparity will be deepened by preventing many Muslim women from entering the public service, particularly in certain sectors. While hospitals and universities will be allowed to exclude themselves from the charter's restrictions on wearing religious items, daycares and public schools most certainly will not.

Solidarity or exclusion?

Quebecers may go to the polls in December. Communities of all stripes should unite against the PQ's austerity measures, but they will instead be divided by a charter of exclusion; where they should find a common project in a secularism that is part of an anti-neoliberal alternative, many people will instead be swayed by racism. As socialists, we need to propose a positive, inclusive vision of secularism. But in this context of social polarization, what is needed most is solidarity.

Religious dogmas are antithetical to social progress, particularly when it comes to gender equality. However, organized religions must be understood as structures of collective oppression based on material conditions that need to be fought collectively, as many Quebecers did in the 1960s. Religious believers are not breaching the rights of the non-believers. Any struggle against the

oppressive aspects of religions will have to be organized from within communities, not by the state. Just as we cannot fight capitalism by fighting factory workers, we cannot fight religion by fighting Muslims. If supporters of the charter were sincere, they would begin by fighting economic insecurity, sexist marketing and rape culture — far greater causes of inequality than any veil.

Blueprints for a principled, collective reflection on secularism may be found in the Quebec Women's Federation paper *La laïcité, un moyen de lutter contre les fondamentalismes religieux*. "The FFQ believes we need to be vigilant in order to eliminate all patriarchal, racist, heterosexist, capitalist or colonial practices that violate women's rights. By addressing inequalities and social and economic exclusion in society, the FFQ is certain that we may provide women with the means to liberate themselves from any social, cultural or family control they may suffer." In the face of structural socio-economic inequality, secularism is part of a broader struggle. It's time to reframe the debate.

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P.S.

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