

Fighting Bill 21 in Québec

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During the federal election, Bloc Québécois leader Yves-François Blanchet presented himself as Québec's spokesperson while defending the policies enacted at the provincial level by the majority CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government led by François Legault. He thus took up the cudgels for the CAQ's pet project, Bill 21, the so-called Laicity Act, adopted in June 2019, which prohibits civil servants in positions of authority-including teachers-from wearing religious symbols like hijabs, turbans, and kippahs. Blanchet claimed that the law had the support of 70 per cent of Québec's population.

But there are reasons to contest Blanchet's interpretation, as researcher Nikolas Barry-Shaw has shown, opposition to Bill 21 in Québec is greater than a superficial reading of the polls suggests; everything depends on how the question is put.

Moreover, the CAQ never obtained a clear mandate from the majority of Québec electors. In the October 2018 election, the CAQ took 74 of the 125 seats in the National Assembly with only 37.4 per cent of the votes. A third of Québec's 6.2 million voters stayed home, so François Legault's CAQ needed only 1.5 million votes-representing less than a quarter (24.5%) of registered voters-to secure a parliamentary majority.

As Québec Solidaire spokesperson and MNA Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois pointed out in his recent book ([Lux éditeur](#), 2019), it was the most culturally homogeneous ridings that supported the CAQ. Of the 74 ridings where the CAQ prevailed, only eight had an immigrant population exceeding 10 per cent.

Bloc Québécois leader Blanchet was thus incorrect in asserting that Québec overwhelmingly supports the retrograde secularism law.

Legault was indeed successful in using the law and his anti-immigration campaigns to consolidate his own electoral base. But the story is more complicated. Legault's Immigration Minister, Simon Jolin-Barrette, was forced to back down in the face of popular discontent over a planned reform of the Québec Experience program, a shortcut to permanent residence for foreign students with eligible degrees or eligible work experience. The reform would have cut about 300 fields of study from the list of eligible fields, excluding thousands of people, many of whom were already in Québec, from staying here.

Québec Solidaire, which elected 10 MNAs in the last election, came out clearly against the reform, with Nadeau-Dubois accusing the CAQ of a callous and narrow-minded vision of immigration. And QS likewise took a strong position against Bill 21. The evolution in the thinking of QS members reflected that which took place in civil society as a whole, as various groups and organizations came to reject the approach to secularism behind Bill 21 - one which infringes human rights and marginalizes vulnerable groups.

The rise of the right and Islamophobia, both in Québec, where it gave rise two years ago to the tragic Québec City mosque shooting, and also at the international level, of which the mosque shootings in Christ Church, New Zealand last March are a fearful expression, shows us that

exclusion only serves to fuel hatred.

Québec Solidaire has chosen the path of inclusion and rapprochement against stigmatization. And it is not alone. The ban on religious symbols has been publicly opposed by trade unions, such as the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) and the Greater Montreal regional council of the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ), and the Fédération nationale des enseignantes et des enseignants du Québec (teachers' federation), by faith based groups like the Centre Justice et Foi, by women's rights organizations like the Fédération des Femmes du Québec, by human rights groups like the Ligue des droits et libertés and the Commission des droits de la personne (a government agency), as well as by Montréal's City Council, among many others. Legal challenges to Bill 21 have also been mounted from within Québec society by the inter-faith group Coalition Inclusion Québec and the English Montreal School Board.

To the vast majority of francophone Québécois, outside intervention in this matter is neither welcome nor useful. The condemnations of Bill 21 issued by the city councils of Calgary, Winnipeg and Toronto among others—an initiative endorsed by NDP leader Jagmeet Singh—has no dissuasive impact on ethnic nationalists who support the ban on religious symbols, much less on political parties like the CAQ, the PQ or the Bloc. On the contrary, it fuels a certain sense of cohesion in defence of the Québec nation and against foreign interference. It is also perceived as an intrusion or even an affront by those who are not necessarily in favour of Bill 21. To many people's minds, it is part and parcel of a tendency in English Canada to denigrate Québec. The opposition to Bill 21 and anti-Muslim sentiment must continue to come from within Québec's progressive forces.

And there's plenty of work to be done to confront and combat Islamophobia in English Canada too, as evidenced by a 2017 CROP poll commissioned by Radio-Canada which showed that while 32 per cent of Québécois are mostly or completely in favour of a ban on Muslim immigration, nearly a quarter of Canadians (23 per cent) outside Québec also support such a ban.

While solidarity must transcend cultural distances and national borders, it cannot be achieved without mutual understanding of one other's problems and realities. The differences are too great and the prejudices are unfortunately still too deep-rooted.

Translated and edited with additional content by Andrea Levy.

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