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Quebec Government's Bill 96 on French as the Official and Common Language of Quebec

Language Is Integral to the Right to Be



Passions are being ignited over the Quebec government's Bill 96, *An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Quebec*. Divisions are also being incited pro and con the bill which is expected to be reintroduced in the new session of the National Assembly inaugurated on October 19.

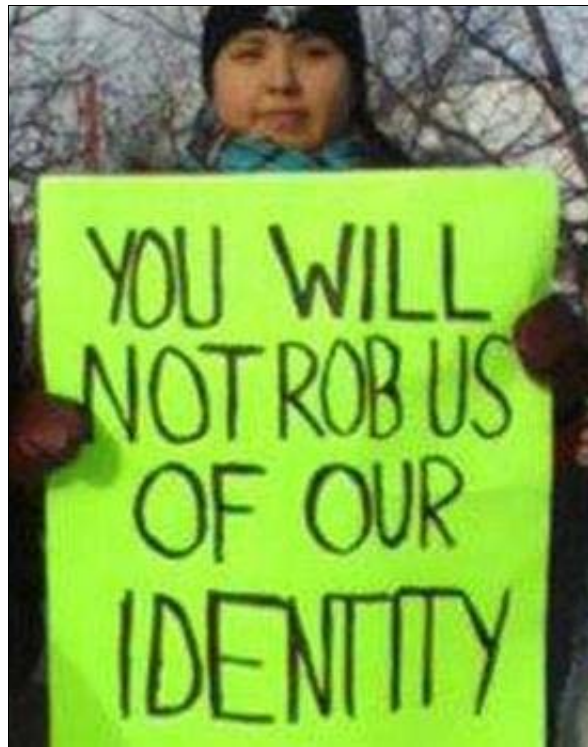
The entire discourse disrespects the people of Quebec who are directly affected by whatever laws are adopted by the National Assembly, as well as the people in the rest of Canada who are concerned about the need to uphold the rights of all and are being incited to oppose Quebec on the language issue. Meanwhile, the people are kept in the dark about how the issue of language in general and in

Quebec and Canada in particular presents itself.

The issue of language is intimately linked to the right to be. It is much more than words indicating objects. It communicates all the thought material of a people brought down through the ages of that people's existence as a people. It is integral to the ability of a people to express their being. In fact, speech, which requires language, is a fundamental human right because it is the main instrument of communication which expresses the identity of human beings.

Studies over the years have shown that the child who learns to speak in their mother tongue will be strengthened in their identity. When they are deprived of their mother tongue or forced to submit to what are called superior languages and cultures, their right to be is seriously affected.

This is what happens in Canada where the Indigenous peoples are not recognized and more than half the population has arrived since the Second World War with a mother tongue which is neither English or French. Canada implements the Anglo-Canadian policy of multiculturalism, a form of assimilation, while Quebec follows the French policy of integration which is also a form of assimilation. The English and French cultures and languages were declared official in Canada by the government of Pierre Elliott Trudeau when he adopted the policy of bilingualism and biculturalism.



At the time, Indigenous languages and cultures were by law prohibited. Indigenous children were kidnapped into residential schools and not permitted to speak their languages or practice their ways of life or beliefs for purposes of assimilating all Indigenous peoples into the culture and way of life of the colonizers. The experience of the Indigenous peoples provides ample proof that the policy of cultural genocide resulted in many of their languages either disappearing or having to merge with other languages but remaining at risk of extinction. Meanwhile, the languages and cultures which belong to all those whose mother tongue and culture are neither "English" nor "French," are relegated to an inferior status. As is the case of Indigenous cultures, the cultures of national minorities are given recognition primarily in the form of folkloric contributions.

Furthermore, what is called "culture" is in fact comprised of Anglo-American imperialist culture and anachronistic liberal-democratic institutions.

Within this situation, the outlook regarding matters related to language and culture requires renovation to bring it on par with the needs of the times. Today no problem can be solved unless it is the people themselves who define their right to be and how to express that in a manner that brings laws, policies and the Constitution of Canada itself on par with the conditions in the 21st century. Instead, what are called liberal democratic institutions, which do not in fact represent the people, are stuck in the past. They impose arrangements based on an authority which clashes with the conditions and incite fighting for and against so-called French or English interpretations of laws, or federal versus Quebec or provinces versus Quebec. Quebec's nationhood is not recognized. It is condescendingly accorded "distinct society" status, not the *right to be* based on nationhood.

Only by putting the peoples' right to be at the centre of all policy, laws and considerations, can social solidarity be strengthened. This is because a people who themselves participate in drawing warranted conclusions from the facts, the summation of experience and the need to uphold the rights of all, will defend what's right for the people. Beliefs are a matter of personal conscience. No modern society bases its laws on beliefs but on facts and needs as defined by the people themselves.

Why It Is Important for Quebec to Pay Attention to the Endurance of the French Language

Quebec pays a great deal of attention to the endurance of the French language because it comes under constant pressure to give way to English. However, it does so based on considerations which do not enshrine what the people think or what they want and need because it is not the people who deliberate on the matter but party governments based on criteria which are not discussed. Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that if care is not taken in Quebec, English vocabulary, expressions and jargon easily take over. The viability of the French language, its ability to live, grow, and develop needs to be appreciated because of the prevalence of U.S. media and the fact that it is surrounded every day by English usage. This, in turn, deeply affects the people's culture and their very being.

Quebec does not have a large population like France which can afford to let foreign words slip into common usage willy-nilly without fear of irreparable loss. In France, stop signs read STOP; in Quebec, they read *ARRÊT*. In France the word for email is email; in Quebec, it is *courriel*. Quebec has a department whose mission is to contribute to the preservation of the French language to, amongst other things, make sure vocabulary exists in Quebec French for words linked to modern technology or usage. Unfortunately, it is subject to cutbacks like everything else as a result of the anti-social offensive at a time it could be strengthened to make sure the language is strengthened in a modern manner which incorporates the actual experience of a distinct people whose composition is found in the present, not the past.



It is unfortunate that subsequent governments of Quebec cannot rise to the occasion to defend the French language by defending and respecting the languages and rights of all in Quebec in a manner which encourages social solidarity. This would go a long way to helping define a modern Quebec personality second to none in the world. Instead, language becomes a divisive issue and laws are passed which criminalize those who do not obey signage rules and the like. The upshot is that, in

the end, no matter what laws are passed, cosmopolitanism favoured by anti-social neo-liberal globalization takes over.

Often, the issue of language rights in Quebec is linked to what are called Quebec values in a manner which divides the people into categories: some sort of “true Quebecers” on one side and “others” on the other side. Whereas Quebec favours immigration from what it considers French-speaking countries, such as Haiti, Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia, Gabon and other African countries, at no time does it recognize that for the peoples of those countries, French is the language imposed by the colonizer just as French and English were imposed on the Indigenous nations of Quebec and the rest of Canada, and they too are denied their right to be and forced to submit to what

are considered superior languages and cultures. The fact that immigrants from these countries may know French when they arrive in Quebec may favour the retention of the French language but, because of the promotion of what are called Quebec values, it in no way saves them from the police powers being exerted to impose the kinds of laws subsequent governments are passing in the name of high ideals of laicity, defence of women and the like.

Quebec itself emerged as a nation forged by the sons and daughters of those who were brought to these shores as a result of colonial conquest and the Indigenous peoples who welcomed them. The habitants were subject to constant threats of ex-communication by an ultra-reactionary Catholic Church hierarchy which kept the people in thrall. The English Crown replaced the French Crown and kept the reactionary Catholic hierarchy in place to keep the people suppressed. The English Crown also permitted the people whose mother tongue was French to keep their language so long as they swore allegiance to the English monarch and the institutions which ruled over them. In this way, ruling elites did everything in their power to not permit the emerging Quebec nation to establish its own identity on a modern basis, just as they did with Canada, all the while denying the hereditary rights of the Indigenous nations and their right to be.

The fact is that the people, irrespective of language and national and ethnic background, have always fought reactionary authorities. The Quebec people overthrew the stranglehold and oppression of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church whose bondage was intolerable, from the sexual depravity in the church-run schools, orphanages, hospitals and asylums, to the threats to ex-communicate women who refused to have more children, and all those who read prohibited books linked to the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. It is by fighting this oppression that Quebeckers have always taken their place second to none when it comes to defending the rights of the working people and women. To this day, their expressions of social solidarity lead the way forward. In a similar fashion, attempts of ruling elites both within Quebec and federally, to smash the people's unity by Quebec bashing and inciting passions on the basis of disinformation about language and values lead the way backwards.



Subsequent governments at both the federal and Quebec levels use the language question and issue of values not to unite the people to build a bright future for themselves but to divide them. Police powers and the notwithstanding clause of the Canadian Constitution, which was in fact never even signed by Quebec, are used to enforce what are called French language rights and “Quebec values” in a most unacceptable manner.

Those who reduce identity to neo-liberal values or language in the name of progress, also portray Quebeckers as xenophobic, racist and narrow nationalist which is not the case. Such portraits in fact apply to those who are trying to sow divisions among the people to serve narrow private interests.

Waging the fight for the preservation of the French language within the confines of the framework from the past is a disservice to the people. So too, those who oppose what they call the narrow nationalist approach and defend the multicultural policies pushed by the 19th century federal liberal democratic institutions are also doing a disservice to the people. They peddle neo-liberal cosmopolitanism in the name of progressive values. It is not possible to defend rights on this basis. Both sides are wrong.

While the reforms proposed to the Quebec language law are divisive, it is urgent that the people, and especially the youth, inform themselves on how the issue of language poses itself. They need to fight

for a modern Quebec whose identity is defined by the people in today's conditions, not by those who disinform the polity by peddling false ideological beliefs and propaganda.

The song of the Quebec Youth for Democratic Renewal titled *Nous sommes ce Québec Nouveau* (We are that New Quebec) has verses which say:

Une société nouvelle
Qui reconnaît nos droits
(A new society
Which recognizes our rights)

Le passé de divisions
Nous le rejetons
(The past of divisions
We reject it)

Notre Québec reconnaîtra
Toutes les langues et les cultures
(Our Quebec will recognize
All the languages and cultures)

C'est seulement de cette façon-là
Que le français fleurira
(It is only in this way
That the French language will flourish.)

Nous les jeunes du Québec
Nous sommes ce Québec Nouveau
(We the youth of Quebec
We are that New Quebec)

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