

Quebec Election 2022 Blog #3

QCGN HOSTS VIRTUAL TOWN HALL WITH ÉRIC DUHAIME

Sept. 7, 2022 – The Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) last night hosted a virtual town hall with Éric Duhaime, leader of the Conservative Party of Quebec (CPQ). The online forum provided Quebecers with an opportunity to ask Duhaime questions and simultaneously convey to him their concerns ahead of the Oct. 3 provincial election.

Duhaime opened the discussion by introducing the CPQ as “a positive nationalist party,” one in which non-Francophones play an integral role in the protection and promotion of the French language in Quebec. He outlined his party’s opposition to Bill 96, calling the legislation a political tool by which the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government has created new divisions to consolidate its voting base. The bill, he added, does not protect French as its proponents purport. Duhaime described Anglophones as allies in protecting French. He attributed the decline in French to the Francophone majority’s failure to attract newcomers to learn and use French in their daily lives. Unlike other nationalist parties, he said, the CPQ wants to promote French while respecting the rights of English-speaking Quebecers. The Quebec Liberal Party (QLP) has “betrayed” Quebec’s English-speaking community and taken it for granted, he added, while other parties have “turned their backs” on Anglophones in the province. He said he wants to forge “a new alliance” between French- and English-speaking Quebecers by: (1) repealing Bill 96; (2) repatriating additional immigration powers from the federal government; and (3) investing in programs to support French-language learning and integration for all Quebecers.

Rights and Access to Justice

Asked about his stance on Bill 21, Duhaime responded that his party stands for religious freedom in the private sphere. This right, he said, must be balanced against the public’s right to receive neutral services from a secular government. Asked about his support for Bill 21 versus his opposition to Bill 96 – given that both laws pre-emptively invoke the notwithstanding clause in Canada’s Constitution – Duhaime responded that he opposes government actions that remove rights to seek recourse through the courts. It was unclear whether he was referring to the restrictions in Bill 96 on access to the Quebec courts in English, or to challenges to the bills themselves under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Questioned about his party’s position about COVID-19 and personal freedoms, Duhaime responded that infringements of individual rights should only be justifiable through the use of scientific evidence. As an example, he said, the CAQ government imposed the overnight curfew

in the absence of any scientific reports indicating that such a measure would reduce transmission of the disease.

Education

Duhaime was asked whether he would reverse the CAQ government's cancellation of the Dawson College expansion project. He responded that funding levels to both English- and French-language schools should be equal. Every student should be provided the same level of educational resources, he said, regardless whether they speak French or English. Asked whether he would reinstate the expansion project, Duhaime responded that he would have to confirm whether Dawson needed more funding.

He was asked whether he would grant exemptions under Bill 21 for schoolteachers. Duhaime responded that he would put this question to a vote by party members.

While he supports Bill 40 and its reform of school board bureaucratic structures, Duhaime said, he also believes that English-speaking Quebecers have the right to manage and control their educational facilities through their school boards. Questioned about the expansion of language law to CEGEPs under Bill 96, Duhaime said he is uncomfortable enforcing these rules for adults. He supports "the richness of bilingualism," he added, and wants to encourage English-speaking Quebecers to feel secure enough to attend French-language CEGEPs.

He was asked whether his government would allow newcomers who had received most of their education in English to send their children to English-language schools. Those parents, he responded, would still have the option of choosing private English-language schools.

Health and Social Services

Referring to the severe labour shortage in the health-care sector and the continuing shortfall of access to family physicians, Duhaime said Quebec needs to do better at allowing physicians trained outside Canada to practice medicine within the province. Earlier governmental reforms and inefficiencies in providing services demonstrate that the public system is dysfunctional, he said.

As a proposed solution, he advocated for decentralization and competition between different health-care providers, including privately operated hospitals and clinics. His plan is far closer to European models than the American approach, he added. He was asked whether such partial privatization would deplete the public sector and create inequities in access to health care for lower-income Quebecers. "The incentive for profit" created through a private model, he responded, would encourage higher quality for health services and ensure Quebecers receive better health care.

Vitality of the English-speaking Community

Duhaime said his party's team of candidates features a diverse array of backgrounds and backstories. Asked about the lack of representation of English-speaking Quebecers in the provincial civil service, Duhaime said it is possible that English-speaking Quebecers prefer to work for the federal government, or that English-speaking Quebecers live mostly in Montreal while many of the government jobs are in Quebec City. He did not comment whether the lack of representation could be due in part to systemic discrimination against English-speaking Quebecers.

In his closing remarks, Duhaime said he wants to offer "a fresh start" for English-speaking Quebecers to move away from the Quebec Liberal Party which, he repeated, has taken them for granted for too long. Regardless of linguistic background, he declared, we are all true Quebecers. Duhaime said he is reaching out to the public and hoping more join his new movement.