

Proposed Bill 101 Overhaul Disregards Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms

MONTREAL, May 13, 2021 – The Quebec Community Groups Network deeply regrets that proposed changes to the Charter of the French Language override fundamental human rights and will erode the vitality of our English-speaking minority community.

“The proposed legislative changes are more far-reaching than we could have ever imagined,” QCGN President Marlene Jennings said following a quick review of *Bill 96: An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec*. “The bill, which invokes the notwithstanding clause throughout, puts the collective rights of French-speaking Quebec ahead of the fundamental rights and freedoms of individual Quebecers.”

“At a recent meeting with Minister Simon Jolin-Barrette and subsequent public comments, the government had assured us its objective is not to take away or diminish the rights of English-speaking Quebecers, divide the two language groups, or act to the detriment of the institutions of the English-speaking community,” said Jennings: “Unfortunately, this bill will have the opposite effect.”

QCGN is taken aback that the government of Premier François Legault is proposing to unilaterally amend the Canadian Constitution to recognize the linguistic specificity of the Quebec nation. “That’s a constitutional curveball we certainly were not expecting,” said Jennings.

“This is a fundamental shift in the Canada/Quebec relationship and one we believe is unconstitutional,” she added. “This is a closed-in, narrow vision of a Quebec that is increasingly distancing itself from the rest of Canada.”

“Stricter regulations for commercial signs and the imposition of the notwithstanding clause to supersede the rights and freedoms of Quebecers represents a huge step backward that will create unnecessary conflict and division.”

The QCGN and its stakeholders are also concerned about the plan to extend the application of Bill 101 to businesses with between 25 and 49 employees and the amount of red tape created by a fresh multitude of complicated rules and regulations.

“This bureaucratization will make it more difficult for small businesses to operate and flourish in Quebec, within Canada, and to build strong links with North America and the world,” said Jennings: “The government’s priorities are ill thought out. Many businesses are struggling to stay afloat and the pandemic has had a devastating impact on small businesses in every region of this province. This is

certainly not the time to make the lives of these hard-working merchants and businesspeople even more difficult.”

Jennings added that the QCGN “is certainly pleased that the government is widening access to French-language training – a longstanding demand of our community, particularly from our youth.” She called this “a positive and welcome step that will allow more English-speaking Quebecers to find gainful employment and remain in Quebec.”

The QCGN will take the necessary time to fully examine the details of the 96-page bill, which amends 25 separate statutes including the Charter of the French Language, the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms and the Civil Code of Quebec. Notably we will evaluate any and all parts of the bill that will have the effect of limiting access to government services in English.

“English-speaking Quebecers – part of a largely bilingual community committed to working with Francophones – must also be part of ongoing discussions to update the Charter of the French Language,” Jennings concluded: “We are all Quebecers. All of our voices must be heard in the coming debates around our common language.”

The Quebec Community Groups Network (www.qcgn.ca) is a not-for-profit organization bringing together English-language community organizations across Quebec. As a centre of evidence-based expertise and collective action it identifies, explores, and addresses strategic issues affecting the development and vitality of the English-speaking community of Quebec and encourages dialogue and collaboration among its member organizations, individuals, community groups, institutions, and leaders.

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