

Do English-speakers have a place in Quebec? New integration Bill sows doubt

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MONTREAL, Tuesday, February 25 – Presenting its brief to the National Assembly’s Commission des relations avec les citoyens, the Quebec Community Groups Network expressed concern today that Bill 84 on integration makes almost no reference to Quebec’s English-speaking community. The Bill could lead to financial constraints on community groups and event organizers, represent another reduction of human rights in Quebec, and set the stage for an eventual Quebec constitution and citizenship.

“This is a broad, powerful Bill,” said QCGN Director-General Sylvia Martin-Laforge. “It could very well reach every part of Quebec society and involve all levels of government, professional bodies, community organizations and their events, employers and employees, newly arrived Quebecers and even those who have lived here for generations.”

“And in what can only be interpreted as deliberate, but symbolically powerful omissions, this Bill contains no more than a fleeting, oblique reference to us, a community which has played an enormous role in enriching and developing Quebec – economically, culturally, socially and intellectually – for more than two centuries,” she said.

“So, we have to ask the Minister (Jean-François Roberge, Minister of Immigration and Minister of the French Language), what is our community’s place – what is our role in Quebec society – as Quebecers who speak English, in addition to speaking French?”

“If we are to judge by this proposed legislation, which makes next to no mention of us, nor any role we can and should play in the enrichment and the ‘vivre ensemble’ of Quebec, we fear the answer has been made abundantly clear: We have none.”

The Bill, a framework piece of legislation with yet few specifics about how it would actually work, appears to narrow the definition of Quebec’s heritage and culture to one that is exclusively French, Martin-Laforge said. “This is in spite of the enormous contributions that non-Francophones – our community, First Nations and numerous other minority communities – have made over the centuries to Quebec’s arts and culture, intellectual life, economic development and formidable institutions.”

“We believe we are being written out of history.”

As one of the pillars of an eventual Quebec constitution and possible Quebec citizenship, the Bill seeks to establish a required adherence to a “Quebec culture” that appears to evoke a narrower, more rigid definition of what that culture contains – and what it will exclude. Defining this culture more precisely is crucial, because the Bill places so much emphasis on the need for all Quebecers to embrace it, Martin-Laforge said.

The proposed legislation’s intent to use the state’s financial stick to encourage compliance with its measures is of concern, Martin-Laforge said, as “many of our member organizations are funded at least in part by the provincial government. As we have seen repeatedly, Bill 96, the update of the Charter of the French Language, has provoked multiple misinterpretations by officials at all levels who have been left to enforce that law – whether it be in a library or a hospital emergency ward.”

In its brief, the QCGN asked Roberge to explain who will decide the standards that community groups or event organizers will have to meet in order to guarantee their provincial funding. “This leads us to ask (and we are not being facetious) whether, in addition to a language police to enforce the Charter of the French Language, Quebec must now employ a Culture Police to enforce the eventual policy and regulations of Bill 84?”

The Bill contains four amendments to Quebec’s Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms – the cumulative effect of which is to pare back minority rights, not enhance them.

No mention is made of the need for Quebecers to abide by fundamental human rights beyond the equality of men and women and the secular nature of the state. “One might have expected to have seen such universally recognized rights as freedom of expression, freedom of religion and the right to full and equal recognition and exercise of human rights and freedoms as guaranteed in the Quebec’s Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms,” Martin-Laforge said. “Strangely, they are absent.”

“In establishing the pillars of a constitution it seeks to enshrine, we maintain that Quebec would do well to balance the understandable need to protect and promote the French language with a healthy measure of respect for the precepts of fundamental and universal human rights that its proposed plan for integration now lacks – and to clearly demonstrate the principles its very own Charter espouses.”

The Quebec Community Groups Network (www.qcgn.ca) is a not-for-profit organization bringing together English-language community organizations and individuals across Quebec. Its mission is to identify, explore, and address strategic issues affecting the development and vitality of English-speaking Quebec and to encourage dialogue and collaboration.

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