

Quebec Election 2022 Blog #4

QCGN HOSTS VIRTUAL TOWN HALL WITH BALARAMA HOLNESS

Sept. 16, 2022 – The Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) last night hosted a virtual town hall with Balarama Holness, leader of the newly-formed Bloc Montreal provincial party. The online forum provided Quebecers with an opportunity to ask Holness questions and at the same time convey to him their concerns ahead of the Oct. 3 provincial election.

Holness began by outlining his family history. His Jamaican father immigrated to Canada in 1969 and, a decade later at the height of the first referendum campaign, met his mother, a French-Canadian from the east end of Montreal. Holness outlined several similarities between that era and the present day, with societal divisions affecting the lives of Montrealers. He described Quebec as unique within Canada. But, he added, Montreal is, as well, unique within Quebec. Given the multicultural nature of the metropolis and its high proportion of immigrants, Holness said, this uniqueness should be recognized politically. He added that he hopes to represent Montreal's best interests in the National Assembly.

Rights and Access to Justice

The Bloc Montreal platform calls for the repeal of both Bill 21 and Bill 96. Holness was asked how he would expect to achieve this objective even if he and all the other 11 of the party's riding candidates were elected. He would "advance public dialogue," he responded, so Montrealers would better understand that these bills violate both the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. Likewise, he wants to better explain to the public that these laws limit access to justice. While Holness acknowledged that his party on its own could not annul Bills 21 and 96, he stated he would speak up to protect Charter rights and prevent them from being undermined by majority votes in the Assembly. The pre-emptive use by the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government of the notwithstanding clause in Bills 21 and 96 was not how this clause was originally designed to be used, he said.

Holness stated that he, like most Anglophones, supports Bill 101 and believes the French language makes Montreal a distinct and beautiful city unlike any other in North America. His party would advocate for reinstating the expansion project for Dawson College and promote high-quality French-language courses in English elementary and secondary schools. The French language should not be promoted at the expense of the minority language rights of Quebec's English-speaking community, Holness said. Asked whether his party's Montreal-centric vision would further exacerbate the divide between the city and the rest of Quebec, Holness

responded that the Greater Montreal region generates half of the province's Gross Domestic Product. "A strong Montreal," he suggested, would help create "a stronger regional Quebec."

Education

Bill 40 – which was designed in part to abolish English-language school boards – should be repealed, Holness said. He advocated for school boards to exercise more power, such as by creating curricula beyond lesson plans. Holness contrasted that with what he described as the CAQ approach to implement courses that promote a "homogenous" Quebec cultural identity. Quebec's elementary and secondary school students should be provided with financial-literacy skills, he said, for example how to file their income-tax returns. They should also be taught about systemic racism and injustices, he added, while being given exposure to advanced science, math, and engineering. Holness said his party would push the government to fund such programs, so as to ensure young people would emerge from the school system better equipped to contribute to Quebec's economy.

He was asked if second-language classes, whether French or English, are provided sufficient priority. Holness responded that such teaching needs to start at the day-care level. He criticized the poor quality of French-language courses designed to integrate newcomers to Quebec, in particular their low level of funding and the consequences regarding both resources and teaching staff. French-language education for schoolchildren must begin at a much younger age, he argued, to ensure they are able to function comfortably and confidently in French by the time they graduate from high school.

Asked how he would push to reinstate the Dawson project and promote the continued viability of English-language CEGEPs in the regions, Holness said he supports these minority language institutions. The additional rules that Bill 96 imposes on CEGEPs do not promote French, he said, but instead attack the English-speaking community.

Health and Social Services

The Bloc Montreal's health-care priorities include advocating for more health-care workers to alleviate the steep labour shortage in that sector, Holness said. He called for revocation of a provincial program under which newly graduated doctors are sent to the regions at the expense of Montreal's communities. In addition, he said, medical schools should be incentivized with government subsidies to enroll more students. Holness wants to accelerate the recognition process for medical credentials obtained outside Canada by health-care professionals, while ensuring they can practice medicine competently in Quebec.

Vitality of the English-speaking Community

Asked to suggest ways that English-speaking Quebecers can contribute to community vitality, Holness advised individuals to “endlessly and tirelessly engage our democracy.” Continuing to hold our leaders accountable and forcefully vocalizing our needs and values is more vital than ever, according to Holness.

He was asked whether exemptions under Bill 101 should be expanded to include families in which parents had received most of their education in English anywhere in the world (such exemptions are currently limited to those educated in English in Canada). Holness replied that he disagreed with such an initiative. Having more students enrolled in French-language schools will promote their bilingualism skills, he said, while helping them learn to navigate French Quebec society.

Holness concluded by asking the public to vote for the candidates they believe will best speak for them in the National Assembly.