

CAN OUR GOVERNMENT BECOME INCLUSIVE?

By *Anthony Housefather*

The Quebec Government has put forward a consultation paper in preparation for the National Forum on Citizenship and Integration which will be held in Quebec City on September 21st and 22nd. The Government has stated that the consultation paper has the joint objectives of presenting and explaining what Quebec citizenship is, defining measures to promote understanding and appreciation of Quebec citizenship, increasing civic participation and trying to create partnerships with all spheres of Quebec society in defining those measures. I would note that Minister Robert Perrault should be congratulated for the way that his department has now undertaken a consultation process involving English-speaking, aboriginal and cultural community groups in order to hear their concerns about this document. It is vital, when discussing concepts like Quebec citizenship, that the Government understands that the term “citizenship” sends out warning bells for most federalists who will ask whether the goal of the document is to jointly define a civic partnership in Quebec or to further the goal of Quebec independence.

Most English-speaking Quebecers are happy to express their attachment to Quebec provided that their attachment to Canada and their support for our federal system is respected. The draft document makes many historical and political references to Quebec’s relationship with Canada that are deeply disturbing. The document refers to Canada’s refusal to recognize the Quebec people, Quebec’s ambiguous and problematic status within Canada and the Constitution Act of 1982 in ways that most English-speaking Quebecers would totally disagree with.

For English-speaking Quebecers and indeed many other Quebec federalists to buy into this process these political references will have to be removed from the document. Indeed, if the Government is truly in good faith, it should be made clear at the beginning of the document that the Quebec Government’s desire to instill pride in living in Quebec is not in any way meant to diminish the attachment most Quebecers have to being citizens of Canada or to diminish the important symbols of being part of Canada, including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian flag. If the Quebec government is willing to modify the document to state this, it will go a long way toward convincing groups representing the non-francophone community to accept to join together with the Government in defining our civic responsibilities as Quebecers.

In addition the references in the document to the English-speaking community need to be modified. The document makes it sound like English-speaking Quebecers were

handed institutions on a silver platter by the Quebec Government and ignores the essential role that the English-speaking community played in developing Quebec society and the institutions we now define as bilingual. It would be important as well for the Government to recognize that the English-speaking community is a very multicultural and diverse one that goes far beyond people with English as their mother tongue.

The portion of the document that is the most objectionable is the statement that there is a consensus in Quebec society that French is the common public language. The Government has never defined what that concept means. If it meant that there was a universal recognition that French was the principal language used by most Quebecers nobody would dispute it. If however, it means that people are supposed to use French in public and that English and other languages are relegated to private use, the English-speaking community would massively reject this concept. We are part of a bilingual country and English retains status as one of the official languages of the courts and legislatures of Quebec. Moreover, the state should make every effort to accommodate the preference of the tax paying citizens when it comes to language of service rather than the individual accommodating the wish of the state to provide services only in French. The document should be recast to make it clear that while French is the primary language used by Quebecers, many others use English and prefer to have their public services in that language. It should also state that new arrivals to Quebec are expected to learn French but have every right to define themselves as part of the English-speaking community and receive public services in English.

In order to show its commitment to the English-speaking community receiving services in our language the Government must ensure that we are proportionately included as employees in the Quebec public sector. The document makes reference to Draft Law 143 which is meant to establish equity programs for many para-public agencies. The English-speaking community and the cultural communities have not been included as target groups in that draft law despite the clear evidence that we are under-represented throughout the public sector other than in bilingual institutions. This Draft Law which also falls under Minister Perrault, is something which English-speaking community leaders will be watching very carefully in order to see whether the Government's oft-stated commitment to openness in public sector jobs truly extends to English-speaking Quebecers.

There are many elements of the document that almost all Quebecers could buy into. The document states that our civic culture should respect equal rights, human rights, the equality of men and women, the promotion of our democratic institutions and the need for inclusion. The real question is whether the Government is prepared to modify the document and its concept of civic partnership to make proud Canadians

living in Quebec and those of us who prefer to use English in our public life feel included. I hope the answer is “yes”.

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