

QCGN Opening Remarks to Committee on Culture and Education

*General consultation and public hearings on Bill 14: An Act to amend the
Charter of the French language, the Charter of human rights and freedoms
and other legislative provisions*

April 11, 2013

National Assembly of Quebec

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Good day Mme Richard, Minister De Courcy and Members of the Committee.

It is an honour to appear before you today, and meet again with our elected representatives in the National Assembly.

Over the past few months, there has been a renewed interest in our community from all parties in the National Assembly – and not just about Bill 14. It is a positive development that the Government has assigned a cabinet level interlocutor, and we value the time that all parties have invested in listening to our concerns. We believe that all parties have benefited from this improved communication and the QCGN aspires to formalize the tradition. These exchanges have the potential to lead to an agreement on what the Government of Quebec can do to support the vitality of the English-speaking communities of Quebec. Historic differences are increasingly minimized by the new generation of multi-lingual young Quebecers for whom family, jobs, and stability are the priority – surely we all recognize the urgency to work together on ensuring linguistic peace and prosperity for Quebec.

So much has been said and written about Bill 14 since the proposed overhaul of Quebec's Charter of the French Language was introduced in the National Assembly three months ago. The overwhelming reaction of Quebec's English-speaking community has been critical. We are strongly opposed to the Bill that introduces a whole series of new restrictions on our language that are unfair, unnecessary, and in many cases would have a detrimental effect on our already fragile communities. It takes away acquired rights that have maintained a fragile linguistic peace for the past 35 years. And while it will alienate English-speaking Quebecers, it will do little to protect and promote the French language.

If passed, Bill 14 would restrict the right of municipalities and their citizens to decide how their own taxpayers will be served. It would endanger the future of some of our small schools by revoking an exemption for French-speaking military personnel, who might be transferred to another province, to send their kids to English schools. It would place a greater burden on all small businesses – French and English – that will have impacts ranging from some enterprises deciding

not to expand to others deciding to go to another province where the cost and irritants of doing business are less onerous.

Perhaps our deepest concern is the proposed change to the preamble of Quebec's Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms contained in the bill.

Bill 14 is a bad law that runs counter the interests of Quebecers. It attempts to create a common identity by coercion, an approach that does not work, and which we loath when attempted in other parts of the world. It runs counter to the unique historic characteristic of Quebec society as a large extended family, in which people have their differences, but in which everyone is included. The response to this approach has been the integration of Quebec's English-speaking community, so strongly evidenced by its high levels of bilingualism.

Bill 14 seeks to manipulate Quebec's legal system, taking away Quebecers' rights to be themselves. Bill 14 would define our identity for us, and sublimate our rights and freedoms in the process. Bill 14 does not fix problems, it creates them.

English-speaking Quebec is not equitably represented in the civil service, nor are we present with a real voice in the province's political structure. This has two effects. First, it cuts out the voice of over 10 per cent of the province's population in the development of public policy. Second, it sends a clear message to the minority that it is excluded from the public discourse. Suspicion, ignorance and misunderstanding continue. Rational discussion is made difficult. Rapprochement is labeled as treacherous. The politics of fear are encouraged.

Finally, the disconnect between Quebec's English-speaking minority and its provincial government creates over-expectation on the role of the federal government in the lives of our English-speaking minority. The Canada that Quebec founded along with Ontario, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick gave provinces jurisdiction over most areas of government that meet the direct needs of Canadians like health care, education, and the administration of justice.

The future of our community lies with you, our provincial government. You should get to know us better, and demonstrate the leadership necessary to ensure your English-speaking minority is socially, economically, and politically integrated. Your English-speaking community is a bilingual cohort that will continue to help you build and compete in the global economy. English-speaking Quebecers continue to work alongside French-speaking colleagues to produce world leading innovation in fields as diverse as arts and entertainment, medicine, pharmaceuticals, and aeronautics.

Our regional communities, in places like Quebec City and Sherbrooke, attract and help retain immigrants vital to our province's economic growth and success. Think about these examples when considering how to overcome the labour shortage that we will soon face, or Northern development and the value of small English-speaking communities in Sept-Iles and on the North Shore.

Public policy must be based on facts, not myths. Quebec shaped its linguistic legal regime and approach around the reality of the '60s and '70s. Do we believe the political, social, and economic environment which reigned all those years ago should be dictating today's policy choices? No credible evidence has been presented to show that this Bill is necessary or urgent at this time.

Bill 14 is not the solution. It promotes public policy that excludes Quebecers for whom French is not a marker of personal identity. It warps human rights legislation to elevate protection of the linguistic majority at the expense of all other minorities. Good public policy seeks to transform personal values for the public good and develop voluntary compliance - not be a vehicle for coercion that amplifies linguistic tensions.

The QCGN believes it is time for Quebec to stop and consider its linguistic future. Today's Quebec is not the Quebec of the '60s or '70s. Quebecers are confident, accomplished and *maîtres chez nous*. Surely we can find a way to have a rational and reasonable conversation regarding the strategic accommodation of linguistic minorities in Quebec. The injustices of the past – real or perceived– should not be writing the script for our future.

This brings us to our final point. Unfortunately, on the issue of language, the two solitudes persist. Our government, the political parties and the professional bureaucracy simply do not understand our concern about the vitality of English-speaking communities. For us, it's not about language. On the other hand, our community does not understand how bill 14 will protect and promote the French language.

Every Canadian province and territory has a mechanism to hear from its French-speaking minority communities. Quebec is an active supporter of these communities. We think it's time the Government of Quebec to make the same investment in understanding its-English-speaking minority community. It is time to begin real dialogue through a standing mechanism to bridge the gulf of misunderstanding that persists between you and your English-speaking community. Think of what we will accomplish together, and what our two solitudes have lost when apart.

We are ready to dialogue.