

Barbara Kay: Why Quebec's immigration and secularism bills get it right

[National Post](#) - Tuesday June 18th, 2019

Quebec's Bill 21 is finally law. Premier François Legault's government invoked premature closure to end fierce debate over the weekend, and it passed 73-35, the Parti Québécois in support, the Liberals and Québec Solidaire opposed. The law enjoys overwhelming support amongst ethnic québécois, but almost none amongst minority groups, who read xenophobia and even racism into its proscription of religious symbolism in the public-service sector. The bill, as passed, includes the Notwithstanding Clause, which is expected to discourage Charter challenges to the law.

I'm on record in support of Bill 21. The government's philosophical position is that secularism, as an existential component of Québécois identity, may reasonably trump the multiculturalist paradigm in areas of civic interaction under the state's aegis, such as public education, law enforcement and the bureaucracy. Multiculturalism is one vision of society that happens to prevail in most Western societies. But it is not the only vision that is entirely consistent with democratic principles, especially in societies desirous of preserving and strengthening the cultural identity that made their nation (or as in Quebec quasi-nation) the attractive destination it is for immigrants.

I think many Canadians, not just québécois, feel that policies like Bill 21 will be a positive force for social integration of immigrants, just as Bill 101, the 1977 Charter of the French Language, equally contested, ensured that immigrants to Quebec became successfully integrated linguistically. Progressives should resist the facile reflex to label it "Islamophobic," even though extreme distaste for face cover in Quebec — and the forthrightness to say so, unlike in the rest of Canada, where it is viewed with almost as much distaste — was the spark 11 years ago that got this whole ball rolling. Bill 9 was also passed in the wee hours of Sunday morning. This law reforms Quebec's immigration system over which, uniquely amongst the provinces, the province has near-autonomous control. New selection criteria will more efficiently match immigrants with employment needs, as opposed to the first-come system of the past.

Controversially, the law will condition permanent-residency eligibility on immigrants passing a language and "values test." The change will pre-emptively cancel out 18,000 immigration applications, jeopardizing the fate of about 50,000 immigrants already in the processing queue, and they will have to start over under the new rubrics. That last part seems pretty indefensible ethically. But in principle, the idea of prioritizing immigrants who offer immediate economic and cultural value to Quebec makes sense and accords with the wishes of most Quebec voters.

By coincidence, a new Leger poll[that asks Canadians what the first priorities of the federal government should be, finds that 63 per cent of respondents want the government to limit the number of immigrants we welcome each year, "as we may be reaching our limit to integrate them in our communities," while 37 per cent of respondents think the federal government should prioritize increasing the numbers "to ensure that we can meet the demands of our growing economy." (Notably, the poll did not provide a third choice of keeping immigration levels the same, so add that caveat to your mental hopper.)

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Barbara Kay: Abortion should be about medical ethics, not Liberal politics

Barbara Kay: I read The Siege of Tel Aviv, the novel they don't want you to read

Uncertainties over Canada's evolving national identity won't be stifled by mockery and derision. Federal Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen does his party and the nation no service by associating a wish for a more manageable immigration flow with "misinformation and conspiracy theories."

The sudden, startling success in the last EU election of Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, but also the slow, steady gains by populist parties like Switzerland's People's Party, Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France, Matteo Salvini's The League in Italy and Alternative for Germany, are linked to rising concerns over immigration and its impact on national identity. Brexit Remainers were all about the economic reasons for staying in the EU. Leavers wanted to open up a conversation about the cultural changes wrought by mass immigration. Liberal pundits insisted that Leavers were all old white men nostalgic for cultural homogeneity, but in fact, Brexit was endorsed by 50 per cent of women, 50 per cent of 35-44 year olds and one in three black and ethnic minority voters.

According to Matthew Goodwin, professor of politics at the University of Kent and co-author of National Populism: the Revolt against Liberal Democracy, for "three decades now, almost every major study in Europe has found that wanting to reduce immigration is, by far, the strongest predictor of whether or not somebody will vote nationalist populist." If progressive elites keep associating the very notion of attachment to national identity with racism, those who feel that

attachment are bound eventually to place their political trust in those who acknowledge the legitimacy of their sentiments. See, for example, under Quebec: Bills 21 and 9.