

Quebec's commission on "Reasonable Accommodation" and the growth of anti-Muslim chauvinism

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The series of public hearings being held across Quebec this fall by the commission on "reasonable accommodation practices" is fanning a xenophobic debate, based on fabricated fears and politically manipulated sentiments, that religious fundamentalist immigrants, especially those from Muslim countries, are imposing their views on Quebec society.

Co-chaired by Gerard Bouchard, a nationalist historian, and liberal philosopher Charles Taylor, the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences (popularly known as the Bouchard-Taylor Commission) was called by the Quebec Liberal government last February on the eve of a Quebec provincial election. This followed a months-long media campaign of sensationalist reporting of isolated incidents of friction between religious minorities and other Quebecers—a campaign that sought to make the case that religious minorities are making "unreasonable" demands.

Mario Dumont, leader of the right-wing populist Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), seized on the issue to promote himself as the champion of Québécois "de souche" (of old stock)—i.e., French-Canadians. As the ADQ's popularity climbed in the polls, the Liberal government of Jean Charest sought to remove the question of accommodating minorities from the election debate by referring it to a consultative commission. Dumont, with the support of the corporate media, nevertheless succeeded in making this a major campaign issue. When the tiny municipality of Herouville adopted a "code of conduct for new arrivals," banning, among other things, stoning and female circumcision (genital mutilation), Dumont welcomed this act of anti-Muslim hysteria as a "cry from the heart."

(Herouville, a town of 1,400 inhabitants, has no immigrants. Its statement reads, "We would especially like to inform the new arrivals that the lifestyle that they left behind in their birth country cannot be brought here with them and they would have to adapt to their new social identity.")

While Dumont placed anti-immigrant and especially anti-Muslim racism at the forefront of his campaign, he also sought to appeal to frustrations over unemployment, economic insecurity and low wages, by claiming recent Quebec governments have favored Montreal, where most of Quebec's immigrants live, over the regions and "baby boomers" over young people.

By exploiting popular alienation from the establishment and

diverting it along reactionary lines, the ADQ leader set the right-wing tone for the entire election campaign and succeeded in turning what had been a marginal party into the Official Opposition in Quebec's Parliament.

Both the Parti Québécois (PQ) and the Liberal Party of Quebec, Quebec's traditional governing parties, adapted to the ADQ's anti-immigrant stance—the PQ by demanding in the midst of the election that the electoral law be changed to disallow women wearing the Hijab from voting; and the Liberals by setting up the Bouchard-Taylor Commission and following the ADQ and PQ in demanding that the "veiled women" be stripped of the right to vote. (See "Quebec state yields to right-wing provocation on eve of provincial election")

By its very existence, the Bouchard-Taylor Commission legitimizes and fans a reactionary debate founded on a gross distortion of the facts. It can only serve to amplify the sentiments of intolerance towards ethnic minorities that right-wing demagogues like Dumont and broad sections of the ruling class are seeking to promote.

The Order in Council setting up the commission states that "certain accommodation practices related to cultural differences might call into question the fair balance between the rights of the majority and the rights of minorities." [1] The same cliché is used in a document issued to guide discussion at the Public Hearings. "Recent events have shown that accommodation or harmonization practices have a much broader scope" than countering the discrimination that the individual faces. "They go beyond the individual and assume a collective dimension."

A careful examination of the most sensationalized of these "recent events" shows that they involve minor accommodations that do not go beyond the "good neighbor" category of relations between different religious and cultural communities.

One involved a Hassidic Jewish community that offered to pay for the installation of glazed windows on the side of the Avenue du Parc YMCA, which lies adjacent to its synagogue. The Montreal sport center responded favorably to the offer after several members complained about being visible from the outside and of an unpleasant view onto a dilapidated alley. This event was built up by a major Quebec newspaper into an example of "over-accommodation" that, in ceding to the antiquated dress code of a religious minority, put into question nothing less than "equality

between men and women.”

The big business media also made a hue and cry over complaints from some Muslims that a female doctor had not been available to assist their wives in childbirth. An obstetrician at St. Mary’s Hospital stated that the problem was merely that “people had expectations” that it would always be possible to find a woman doctor. Last year, the hospital revised its policy; it now informs couples at their first visit that it cannot guarantee the exclusive presence of female personnel. This simple action was enough to considerably lessen friction.

Another sensationalized incident was the visit by a group of 260 Muslims to a maple-sugar cabin in the Montérégie region. After dinner, the group asked the owner for a private space in which to pray. The owner offered them the dance hall, which was being used by a single family, and stopped the music for 10 minutes. This innocent action, reproduced regularly at this and other sugar cabins whenever Catholic priests stop to bless family meals, was transformed by the media into the “expulsion” of Quebecers for the benefit of Muslim prayer. The owner Roch Gladu received hundreds of hate calls for having permitted Muslims to pray in his sugar cabin.

Gerard Bouchard, co-chair of the commission and brother of the former right-wing, Parti Québécois Premier Lucien Bouchard, has attributed this chauvinist outbreak to a decline in French-Canadian tradition. “It’s as if Quebecers of French-Canadian origin are feeling that their culture is going through a slump while the culture of others [is alive]. There is what you could call a very serious identity problem among Quebecers of French-Canadian origin.”

A discussion document issued by the Bouchard-Taylor commission raises the curtain, if only slightly, on the objective roots of the social anxiety that Dumont tapped into during the last election campaign: “Many Quebecers are experiencing a period of uncertainty and questioning. This mood is undoubtedly not unrelated, in particular, to...growing economic insecurity linked to economic globalization, including company migration.” [2]

The commission has adopted as its mission the re forging of a Québécois national identity, which would cut across class lines and serve to ideologically unite the populace.

Such an identity would serve as instrument for the Quebec ruling class to rally the population—i.e., the working class—behind it in the ever-intensifying global struggle for markets and resources. Quebec workers would see themselves increasingly called upon to sacrifice their jobs, wages and social programs in the name of “national interest”—that is to say, the profits of a handful of multimillionaires.

But what is to constitute the “ideological cement” for the new Quebec identity Gerard Bouchard dreams of?

The economic boom of the post-Second World War decades, which constituted the objective basis for the rapid expansion of the welfare state in Quebec during the 1960s, has long been exhausted. The ruling class, in Quebec, Canada, and all the advanced capitalist countries long ago abandoned a policy of social reforms in favor of an open assault on the social position and democratic rights of the working class.

Unable to offer a decent standard of living to working people, and even less, to offer an ideal of social progress, the ruling class

has increasingly sought to divert the popular frustrations caused by growing economic security into the dead end of chauvinism. Immigrant minorities become the scapegoat for the profound social crisis caused by a failing profit system.

The intolerance directed at ethnic communities today is a continuation of the discriminatory language measures adopted in the late 1970s by the Parti Québécois with the strong support of the trade union bureaucracy.

In the last provincial election, the ADQ stole something of the nationalist thunder of the PQ, which is rightly popularly perceived as an establishment party with a socio-economic agenda little different from that of the federalist Liberals. The PQ has responded to its reduction to third-party status by seeking to compete with the ADQ in appealing to chauvinism and anti-immigrant prejudice.

The new PQ leader Pauline Maurois has authored a bill that would remove the political rights of any citizen newly arrived in Quebec who after three years did not show an “appropriate” knowledge of the French language. Specifically, those who failed a language test would be stripped of the right to be a candidate in municipal, school board or Quebec elections, the right to present petitions to the National Assembly, and the right to financially contribute to political parties.

Such chauvinist and anti-immigrant appeals play the same role in Quebec as they do on the international scene—to split the working class and encourage the prejudices of backward layers of the population in an attempt to develop a social base for the most reactionary measures.

These measures include the destruction of what remains of the post-World War II welfare state and the gutting of democratic rights, as well as the prosecution of wars of conquest abroad. In Afghanistan, for example, in the heart of oil- and natural gas-rich Central Asia, the Canadian and Quebec ruling class is seeking to exert its influence in the global struggle for resources by deploying 2,500 troops to wage a neo-colonial counter-insurgency war on behalf of the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai.

Whether in Afghanistan or at home, liberal values—the liberation of Afghan woman on the one hand, the defense of secularism and the equality of men and women on the other—are being invoked in a demagogic fashion and used as a cover for the ruling elite’s program of social reaction and militarism. This is the true meaning of the debate on “reasonable accommodation.”

Note:

[1] The commission’s website can be found at <http://www.accommodements.qc.ca/commission/index-en.html>.

[2] <http://www.accommodements.qc.ca/documentation/document-consultation-en.html>, p. 5



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