

Quebec Liberals stoke PQ's anti-democratic Charter of Values campaign

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After months of internal wrangling, the Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ) has issued its official response to the Parti Québécois provincial government's antidemocratic and chauvinist Charter of Quebec Values (Bill 60). While posing as proponents of democracy and inclusion, the Liberals support many of the Charter's most objectionable aims and are advocating a counter-proposal that, in many respects, more explicitly targets Quebec's Muslim minority.

In the name of secularism and equality between men and women, the PQ's Bill 60 would outlaw the wearing of "ostentatious" religious symbols by the 600,000 Quebec public sector workers and make them subject to firing if they fail to comply. It also forbids the provision of medical treatment or any other public service, except in emergency cases, to entirely veiled Muslim women. The latter provision harkens back to Bill 94, legislation introduced by the previous Liberal government but never adopted by the National Assembly.

Far from promoting equality, Bill 60 attacks Quebecers' democratic right to practice their religion and denies religious minorities their rights to employment and public services, while encouraging racist sentiment and violence against Muslim women.

Presenting the Liberal response to Bill 60 at a January 21 press conference, party leader Philippe Couillard spoke out of both sides of his mouth. On the one hand, he posed as a defender of fundamental rights with phrases like: "Integration is achieved through employment, not through dismissal." On the other hand, he voiced support for many of the PQ's antidemocratic measures and openly identified the Liberal Party with the defence of Quebec's Catholic "heritage."

Couillard said that there are "many points" in Bill 60 that "already" form part of a public "consensus." The Liberals' only difference with the government is that they want to use "other tools" to "arrive at exactly the same

results." So as not to bring the Quebec government into a clash with the courts and the Quebec and Canadian Charters of Rights, Couillard argued that Quebec and its public and para-public agencies should use administrative measures—rather than the heavy hand of the law—to proscribe religious symbols.

While calling the PQ's "total wall-to-wall ban" "unjustifiable and inapplicable," Couillard declared at the outset that "it is also necessary to clearly frame the exercise of rights. Not wanting to ban everything does not mean that everything should be permitted without limits." In the end, the "limits" proposed by the Liberals are barely distinguishable from the PQ's "wall-to-wall" ban.

"The Quebec Liberal Party," explained Couillard, "says Yes to the preservation of the religious patrimony of Quebec and the crucifix in the Blue Room of the National Assembly"—that is the Catholic crucifix hung by the arch-reactionary Premier Duplessis to symbolize the unity of Church and state." The Liberals, continued Couillard, say, "Yes to State services given and received with uncovered faces; Yes to the ban on the *burka*, the *niqab* and the *chador* for employees of the State; Yes to the need to define and provide a framework regarding (religious) accommodations."

This statement, which reaffirms the special position of the Catholic religion and targets the Muslim minority even more explicitly than does Bill 60, is a clear signal that the Liberals are seeking to play a prominent role in the nationalist and chauvinist campaign being mounted by Quebec's elite.

For several years, provocative stories have appeared in the press about the supposed explosion of requests for "reasonable accommodation" on the part of religious minorities; these reports suggest, more or less subtly, that Quebec is being inundated by Muslims and other religious minorities who are trying to impose their reactionary

views—especially on women—on the majority of “native” Quebecers. *Le Journal de Montreal* of billionaire media and telecommunications mogul Pierre-Karl Péladeau has made this campaign its specialty.

This image of Quebec does not correspond to reality. Its purpose is to hide the real class divisions in society, and to divert popular anger away from capitalist austerity measures and towards ethnic and religious conflicts. Precisely for this reason it has been adopted by all the bourgeois political parties, including the PQ with its Bill 60 and the Liberals with their own anti-immigrant proposals.

In his press conference, Couillard used a cliché which has served to justify the violation of domestic democratic rights and participation in imperialist wars of conquest. “I understand and share,” said Couillard, “the concerns expressed by Quebecers regarding the rise of religious fundamentalism in several countries,” including the fear that it could take hold in Quebec. Couillard went on to attack the PQ from the right: “Bill 60 sidesteps a real concern of the public: the threat of fundamentalism.”

Couillard also said the Liberals would change the government’s reasonable accommodation policy, so as to make consideration of such requests conditional on the applicant proving “that he or she has made the necessary efforts to integrate into the workplace.” What Couillard calls a “reverse burden of proof” is based on the antidemocratic view that there are two classes of citizens: “native” Quebecers and “others”; the “others” must “prove” they merit their place in society.

On the refusal of health care and public employment to fully veiled Muslim women, Couillard was interrupted by a reporter who noted that the Quebec Bar had just published a study concluding that the notion of an “uncovered face” as a criterion for access to social programs, education and other public services has no legal basis. In his response, the Quebec Liberal leader promoted the same right-wing populism as the PQ: “Our approach is not just based on law; our approach also comes from fears of the population.”

While the PQ uses the pretext of secularism to deny Muslim women access to jobs and public services, the Liberals prefer to achieve this through a “dress code.” The dress code would prohibit not only the full veil (*burka* and *niqab*)—under the pretext that a hidden face denies the need for “communication, security and identification”—but also the *chador*, which covers the body but leaves the woman’s face uncovered. Pretending not to see the inconsistency of his position, Couillard

stated that it was the “judgment” of his party that the *chador* “is an indication of social withdrawal” and “female submission” that “is incompatible with public service.”

Couillard’s exposition of the Liberals’ position came after months of bitter infighting. In September, the Liberal leader denounced the Charter of Quebec Values (Bill 60’s first draft) and warned that it would pass “over his dead body.” This message was intended for sections of big business who fear that the PQ Charter’s restrictions could adversely impact foreign investment and immigration. The Liberals are also aware that the English and immigrant communities in Quebec, which form a major part of their traditional electorate, are generally hostile to the PQ’s Charter. But in the face of the PQ’s success in sowing confusion among the French-speaking population by encouraging anti-Muslim prejudice, the Liberals have adopted the PQ’s nationalist rhetoric, proposing their own measures against the Muslim minority.

A genuine struggle against the PQ’s antidemocratic Charter must reveal its true source and motivation: the attempt to divert popular anger against the austerity program of the ruling elite and to deflect social anger and anxiety onto immigrants, Muslims, and other religious minorities.

The PLQ, a party of big business, is as dedicated as the PQ to implementing the massive reductions in public services and social programs demanded by the financial markets and the ruling class. Like the PQ, the Liberals will trample on democratic rights in order to impose capitalist austerity; under the previous Liberal government of Jean Charest a special law (Bill 78) was passed to break the 2012 Quebec student strike.

The Liberals’ attempt to outdo the chauvinism of Bill 60 shows that there is no section of the establishment—whether federalist or *souverainiste* (pro-Quebec independence)—which is prepared to defend democratic rights. This task falls to the working class, which must launch a united struggle of French-speaking, immigrant and Anglophone workers in Quebec and across Canada against capitalist austerity and for social equality.



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