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# Meeting the Bill 96 Challenge

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A paper outlining how to meet the Bill 96 challenge within the context of how Quebec's English-speaking community usually promotes and defends itself

Submitted by

The Greater Quebec Movement (GQM) to  
The Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN)

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## **What Is the Greater Quebec Movement (GQM)?**

The Greater Quebec Movement (GQM) is a think tank first founded in 1995 dedicated to the promotion and protection of Quebec's Anglophone minority. The organization also explores ways of better integrating Anglophones into the Quebec mainstream.

Our policies do not accent the protection of minority institutions but rather focus on the needs of community members themselves. At the core of the movement is the belief that freedom of choice and effective bilingualism flow through an empowerment of individuals. In the Quebec context, such empowerment for Anglophones requires that they have all the tools where they can compete effectively in a workforce where French is the principle common language.

While also concerned with the question of civic and minority rights, the GQM is questioning the ethic, often adhered to by minorities everywhere, that as a linguistic minority we can only survive by remaining apart or segregated with separate learning environments, media, institutions, and group rights. We believe the central challenge facing Francophones and Anglophones in Quebec is how to better manage the mutual integration these linguistic communities are already experiencing; Francophones as citizens of a world where English is increasingly the common global language, and Anglophones trying find their place in Quebec where French is the predominant local means of communication.

The earlier forms of mutual integration we are experiencing, be it the increasing inter-marriage rate, mixed workplaces and neighbourhoods, can still be awkward due to outdated conditioning we get from historical myths and institutional segregation. To help remedy this problem the GQM has put forward some public policy ideas for discussion. These ideas include:

- The development of a new linguistic social contract between Quebecers. The vehicle proposed for this new vision would be a new separate Quebec constitution with an expanded Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms that would include this new linguistic social contract.
- The establishment of integrated educational environments.
- An emphasis on social integration to tackle the continued persistence of Quebec's multiple solitudes.

## **Introduction: The Contextual Narrative That Underlines Bill 96**

On the Quebec Communities Groups Network (QCGN) website in an introduction to how communities are counted, an insightful observation was made which is worth restating. Statistics are used to paint a picture; to tell a story. What statistics are presented; how they are utilized, and to what ends, is another matter. They are instruments used at the discretion of the storyteller.

This observation holds true for all social sciences. What facts are solicited, how they are managed, crafts a story. Readers must remind themselves that, in the end, all studies of identity, nationhood, and history are constructs. Sometimes, either through bias or scope, facts, especially those that are pertinent to “the others” are underappreciated, misunderstood or simply omitted. Ultimately the writer must confront his ultimate temptation of never letting the facts get in the way of a good story.

Bill 96 is one such story, not too different from several Brothers’ Grimm fables we might have read in our youth. The story has a subject, or, if you will, a main character: the Quebec people. These are a generous, tolerant people, and, as the author often remind us, too hospitable for their own good. Although endowed with a language and a culture that has survived a long struggle against a hostile majority, a generation of linguistic peace has allowed their vigilance to lapse.

Shaped by past struggles for cultural survival and concerns for its future, this story is set in the present. Although it speaks to issues affecting the whole of the province, the true concern seems focused upon the Montreal region, which is lauded often ironically, and perhaps patronizingly, by Quebec politicians as a wonderfully cosmopolitan, bilingual and multilingual metropolis, city and region.

This fixation brings us to the thick of the plot. Bill 96 is crafted around this central premise: the use of the French language in Quebec is threatened by Quebecers, who fail to uphold the tenet that the French Language must be the only language of the Quebec state and its officialdom. The existence of this other space, this Montreal anomaly, undermines Quebec’s language and identity. As such, the government must step in to ensure that all communications between the state and its citizens, between all institutions and the people, between individuals, within workplaces, marketplaces and communities, take place in the sole, official and common language.

Every good story needs its antagonist and the authors of this Aesopian tract rise to the occasion. The villain is English. Not Johnny English as portrayed by Rowen Atkinson, not the English people far overseas and not even that local rump of the Canadian nation which, although not a real minority, we are assured, are deeply loved valued and appreciated as Quebecers. No, it is the English language. Like sin, it is seductive, a temptress that leads the faithful astray and infiltrates every aspect of our vulnerable society. Left unchecked it will be as lethal as Lord Voldemort to the Quebec nation. Aided by a federalist culture committed to what nationalists identify most fearfully as creeping bilingualism and

multiculturalism, English returns like a snake to offer its forbidden fruit. That is the backdrop of this morality play, where facts and arguments are lined up in a narrative whose only conclusion is that English is *lingua et cultura quae non sunt grata*. It must be purged as there is too much of it.

Finally, having established that language laws need to be reinforced, the government is of course the Protagonist, the hero of the story. Like dragon slayers of old, it will slash and burn a whole slew of rights guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and by the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, to beef up the Charter of the French Language with a long list of amendments and proposals.

The government will hire more inspectors to enforce the proposed law further limit access to English-speaking teaching institutions and declare the anglophone community no longer to be an official minority in Quebec. The only thing missing ought to be an appropriate English title to his proposed law, e.g., Johnathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal", or alternatively, "How we would all be so much happier with only one common language".

The climax will come when the Bill is "examined" in an orchestrated public consultation, a show trial of sorts, where English will be revealed for the true menace that it is. There can be no doubt as to the testimonies and the commission's outcome. Bill 96 will be adopted by the National Assembly almost unanimously. What opposition there will be shall be small and sheepish, a few lone politicians who will hedge, spin and, ultimately, sacrifice principles for political expediency. Once the deed is done, an epilogue to the story will read how this bill turned to Law was a watershed event in the protection of not only Quebec's common language, but of the nation itself.

The End

So, what happens next?

Undoubtedly, some Anglophones will turn to the courts to seek redress to this proposed law. That seems the only alternative as our community has little clout politically either on the provincial or national stage. In our opinion, there is little doubt that much of the legislation will be overturned after a long, costly series of court challenges. We believe this confrontational situation will only reinforce in some measure our subculture of denial and resistance against all things Quebec or Quebecois, an attitude that is understandable, but one that has not served our community well.

## **The Need for a Post-Mortem Analysis If Bill 96 Is Passed**

What ought to happen is what happens in every business venture that has gone wrong, in every sports franchise that loses a key game, in every aftermath of a disappointing failure. A post-mortem analysis must be conducted to learn from mistakes made and to measure the possible factors that caused this failure.

That failure, we suggest, is the result of a terrible lack of appreciation within francophone circles, particularly those that have little contact with Montreal's ethnocultural reality of what Anglo Quebecers are. In many ways, our community has become a caricature in the francophone world, which has developed through perceptions continuously filtered through years of linguistic battles and mutual resentments. It is a caricature attached to several negative stereotypes where not only the English language but also those who spoke it were the oppressors.

There should be little wonder then why derecognizing the existence of a linguistic minority in Quebec seems like a modest proposal to those who see the English community as essentially being delegitimate. To some extent, they raise an interesting point. If the English community is entitled to certain protections, who are its members and is there cultural and linguistic cohesion between them? This idea is not new and has circulated among nationalists for a long time. Josée Legault's book « L'invention d'une minorité: les Anglo-Québécois », published in 1992, is one such work. There are many others, yet they largely operate in a linguistic world that our community largely ignores.

Moreover, there is a terrible understanding and appreciation for what social and political discourse is happening in our francophone world by our community. It is as if we have ceased to know them. When did we last have dinner conferences in English, to which a CAQ minister or even the Premier himself would have been invited to hear and try and understand us as we would do the same of him and his views? How many Anglophones follow the governing party's political conventions or workshops; or those of other nationalist parties? We simply ignore them.

It is our contention that when we become an invisible community within our province, we can no longer define and advocate for ourselves. When a community does not define itself, others will define it for them, often badly and prejudicially.

This may explain the strange incident of the premier having to come to the rescue of his own language minister. Several times, the minister had indicated that the only Anglos with rights were the "historic Anglos". It was far from a slip of the tongue. It represents the real belief that many people from cultural and/or immigrant communities have entered and been included in, the Anglophone sphere illegitimately. The 2019 transfer-of-schools debate in the East End of the city of Montreal raised a few eyebrows in francophone circles when most of the parents interviewed from the affected schools had Italian-sounding names. Were these historic Anglos? These are the types of questions that regularly came up at the

many commission hearings we attended for the past 30 years. The minister was being genuine and echoing a large part of his political base.

Given the terrible messaging problem coming from a less polished member of his team, the premier had to step in by stating that historic Anglos are those recognized by the Charter of the French Language as having the right of access to public English instruction. He went further trying to be reassuring about Bill 96: *"It's about protecting French. And all the rights of English Quebecers will be protected."* A good public relations bit, but now with a level of uncertainty having been created regarding historic Anglophones, the statement could be interpreted as insincere.

## **The Importance of Better Defining Ourselves**

It is hard to blame others for defining us poorly when part of the problem is of our own making. Defining an Anglo-Quebecker has been difficult even for our own community leaders.

We tend to forget and ignore that linguistic school boards came into being only recently. The cleavage between Protestants and Catholics before bill 101 was real. Prior to Bill 63, many forget that even among Catholics, ethnicity remained a significant cleavage. A public bilingual school system existed in the 1950 and 1960s and in the early linguistic fights surrounding the St Leonard Crisis, what the nationalists were targeting were not English schools but Bilingual. As with the later Bill 22, the fights over language involved the dominant immigrant group at the time, the Italian community. We also tend to forget that after the introduction of Bill 101, thousands of “illegals” continued attending English schools, almost all children of immigrant families.

It is significant because today, those children form an important part of the very backbone of our English-speaking community. As early as 1983, Josh Freed through his popular book, “The Anglo Guide to Survival in Quebec” identified the largest ethnic English-speaking group as being Italian.

So, what is the Anglo community of Quebec today? It is extremely multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-racial. Most of its population is concentrated in the Montreal region, with some important communities throughout the vast territory of Quebec. It has adapted through 51 years of language laws; it has experienced a level of internal integration that has increased its cohesion not only with the francophone majority but, also, between its own various internal identities.



## **Rethinking How the Community Is Represented and Led**

Regarding its ability to mobilize, and be mobilized, to create for itself community leadership, we contend that this community has a very long way to go. The demise of Alliance Quebec was a serious setback. How it came about; and how it evolved or devolved is no longer an issue. AQ had created a model whereby significant segments of the community could be mobilized through popular participation in a greater forum.

Today, what is projected as leadership emanates from its close association with institutions that service the English-speaking community. That is great for institutional members; but not so for huge segments of people who both cannot be represented and may at times be at odds with their institutions and their viewpoints.

If there is no room for greater representation, how can any leadership, present and future, garner support and credibility from those who lie outside the small tent of institutional membership? Some 30 percent of Anglophones, whose children are eligible for English public instruction, choose to send them to either private- or public-French schools. Are these people still Anglophones? Are they still part of our family; if so, why do we not hear about them; or from them? We cannot ignore them; they are our most important conduits to the francophone world. Consequently, we must represent their interests, and integrate them into the community to represent our interests, to the francophone world.

What of the various communities, that make up most English speakers and the Anglophone community? How does one mobilize them and tap into their resources; gather their voices, experiences and knowledge? We have often raised with the QCGN the importance of real, on-the-ground and individual involvement and participation; we have encouraged and continue to encourage the QCGN to develop structures and conduits to tap into the greater English-speaking community.

Organizations that fund together stay together and grow. Nothing achieves a sense of attachment to a group quite as well as working on a fundraiser and achieving goals. It strengthens organizations; it gives a community *gravitas*. Achieving this is as important as challenging governments in courts; it gets you far greater respect. Organizations that can raise funds effectively need no introductions; they do not allow others to define them—they define themselves.

## **Changing Our Rhetoric and Being More Present in the Francophone Debate**

Finally, how to address the rhetoric that diminishes us as a community. Speaking out is important; speaking out with credibility is even more so. Even if we hold a dissenting opinion from the majority, one should not be afraid to express it. To express it, we must engage; that forum of engagement is their forum: the francophone world.

Therein lays the challenge for our community. We claim to be bilingual; we claim to be Quebecers. We claim that our school system produces graduates fully competent and confident in the common language of Quebec yet rarely do we see our graduates engaging in societal debates with our francophone counterparts. In various nationalist perspectives, there is only one Quebec; only one nation and identity that acts as a prototype to which all citizens must attach themselves. They must adhere to the one nation; to one civic culture. Our answer to that perspective should be in their media, in their town halls, in their language and culture, which are supposedly also ours.

## **Conclusion**

Our challenge is not so much the laws that are proposed or the legality of such measures. Our challenge is to engage in the thinking that leads to such positions and involve ourselves in discussion and debate at that level. When a nationalist defines himself and you by exclusion to an identity, the challenge becomes one of deconstructing that logic.

We need to remind ourselves as well as others that many of us come from backgrounds, which are culturally diverse. Even so, in our day-to-day lives, most of us behave as though we are part of one same community, whichever that community is that we seek to belong to. We also have multiple levels of identity where we can identify with various groups and feel as though we belong.

Bill 96 comes from a different perspective where more is a threat and language orthodoxy is the safety zone sought. It is an understandable position that speaks to the perspectives of its authors. We need to speak from ours.

Most of our members live in the Montreal region, and most identify themselves as Montrealers. Despite a myriad of issues, most Montrealers are generally proud of their city. And whether they are English or French or of immigrant background, most have a common sense of belonging to Montreal. Ours is a deeply and historically cosmopolitan island because of its enormous, ever-growing and diverse population that continues to shape our own unique “Montreal” identity. For many Quebec nationalists, Montreal, immigrants and their respective, different and differing identities are a problem; for most Montrealers, it’s just simply home.

And this is where the government will have the toughest time implementing a vision that increasingly becomes more alien to the average Montrealer. Such laws and the ratio that identifies this region’s cosmopolitanism as a problem will inevitably result in movements calling for more regional autonomy for Montreal.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

- 1) Anglophones need to challenge and change the underlying narrative within French-speaking Quebec, especially its media, that the English language is a threat.
- 2) It is key that we better define ourselves or else others will do it for us and in a way that serves their interests, not ours.
- 3) We need a post-mortem on why our language is constantly being restricted and how as a community we can better prepare ourselves for challenges.
- 4) There needs to be a rethinking of what the community is and how its composite parts can better be reflected within an effective organization that can lobby for it.
- 5) Finally, community members and leaders must become more involved in the mainstream debates taking place within the French-speaking community. This will also require us to rethink how we frame our language-related rhetoric.

### **Note of Thanks for Inviting Us to Participate in the OCGN Bill 96 Hearings**

We would like to thank QCGN President, Marlene Jennings, for inviting us to participate in these hearings as well as Sabrina Atwal for coordinating with us. We appreciate this opportunity to share our thoughts with you on the topics we have discussed above.