

Video 1, Day 1 of Bill 96 Hearings prepared by Andréanne Langevin

1.1 Summary

The proposal for Bill 96 is being discussed at the Assemblée Nationale (National Assembly of Québec) and represents a revision of the 1977 Bill 101, the latter not having been updated since its creation. The video presents debates between plenary and keynote speakers about decisions to be taken with regard to the future of Bill 96. Despite certain changes being proposed, it was confirmed that the proposal would not impact health and social services, which guarantees anglophone speakers access to service in English under Article 15 of the *Loi sur les services de santé et les services sociaux* (Act Respecting Health Services and Social Services).

This video (prepared by Andréanne Langevin) presents the highlights of the first day of hearings on the proposed amendment, Bill 96, tabled by Minister Jolin-Barrette. The question of francophones' and allophones' entry into higher education in English was brought forward, in an attempt to reduce their enrolment and increase it in French Cegeps and Universities instead. One ardent believer of Bill 101 suggested that Bill 96's propositions could be pushed further, by extending Bill 101's application to Cegeps and Universities and thus entirely preventing francophones' and allophones' access to schooling in English. He argued that if students absolutely wanted to study in English, they could attend private Cegeps. And if ever parents did not have the income to send their children to private schooling, students, who would be old enough to work upon applying to Cegeps, could always start working part-time and pay it themselves. However, this argument was quickly branded an elitist one by a Liberal depute, as private Cegeps tuition can cost thousands of dollars per semester and only a fraction of citizens can afford it. Others who also believed in lowering the admission numbers maintained that with social media's presence, students can now easily learn English without needing to attend anglophone Cegeps and Universities.

Another important debate was the quality of spoken and written French both amongst the francophone and anglophone communities. In the case of anglophone communities, it was deemed that French classes in English schools are inefficacious in producing competent French speakers. An attendee argued that a considerable number of anglophone Cegep graduates did not have the necessary knowledge of the French language, either in writing or speaking, to operate in the workplace, even after having taken two college French courses. A suggestion was brought forth, to improve young anglophones' French by having certain courses taught in French, instead of all subjects being taught in English. This would potentially allow anglophone students to be better immersed in French, thus offering them an opportunity to learn more of the language. Similarly, it has also been noted that students in French schools also struggle with French writing. In fact, these students are permitted to use the autocorrect tool *Antidote* during exams, which they then begin to rely upon and lose notions of the grammar rules taught in class. Some proposed to reduce the use of *Antidote* or other such tools, especially during exit exams, such as the *épreuve uniforme de français*, carried out at the end of secondary school. It is hoped that by doing so, students would be less likely to forget how to properly write in French and make fewer grammar and vocabulary mistakes.

Issues with *classes d'accueil*—free French classes for young non-francophone migrant students in Québec—were also raised as certain speakers denounced their inefficiency in some cases. The main problem seems to be the *classes d'accueil* in rural areas where a much smaller number of immigrants reside. The debate is whether or not this small amount justifies the need for these classes as well as linguistic support classes in rural areas. Ruba Ghazal, a Québec Solidaire deputy, born in Lebanon but who migrated to Québec as a child, explained her experience with *classes d'accueil* and how the learning of French goes beyond grammar classes, as she argues that “one needs to love the French language and the Québec culture”. She mentions the importance of discussing the reality of these classes and the benefits, based on her own experience, that they can bring to immigrant students. Adult immigrants also face integration issues if or when they fail to learn rapidly enough the language of the province. A speaker from the *Syndicat de la fonction publique* (Public Employees' Union) sympathised with the reality of many migrants, explaining that between jobs and taking care of one's family, little time or effort remained for the learning of a new language. He lamented the lack of learning resources available to newcomers, which are few and often given in the evenings only. He suggested that language and culture classes should be offered at immigrants' new place of work and during working hours to reduce the stress of finding courses due to busy schedules.

On a similar subject, some speakers argued that multiculturalism has to come to an end, though without precisising what that would entail, and argued that multiculturalism was a tool used by the federal government to put Québec back in its place. They argued that the federal government sees support for multiculturalism as evidence of open-mindedness, but certain Québécois speakers wonder why they do not use their open-mindedness when discussing the distinct Québécois identity. An attendee asserted that Québec's distinctness should be seen as a reality and not as an act of rebellion against the federal government, and that the importance of the French language should be made more explicit to newcomers. An attendee suggested that one answer to the problem of immigrants not learning French quickly enough to adequately integrate Québec society, would be to only accept French-speaking immigrants, from whichever country around the world. In other words, prioritising and encouraging immigration from countries where French is spoken commonly or as a national language. Certain others thought that Québec was becoming too defensive with its language policies. They offered as example the case of advertisements where French writing must be a certain degree bigger than the English translation underneath it. They criticised those who take the time to measure the exact measurement difference between the French and the English writing, arguing that no good could really come of being so fastidious.

Moreover, the case of Gatineau was raised. Gatineau is a city in Québec which borders Ontario, and where anglophone presence is one of the largest in Québec. Even though the anglophone presence cannot be ignored, the francophone population is nevertheless larger than the former, where 221,635 citizens' first language is French and 40,925 citizen's first language is English (Statistics Canada 2016). However, French-speaking Gatineau residents see their careers come to a halt because they do not speak English fluently enough to progress. Certain plenary speakers argued that employers should not demand English proficiency when hiring as it is discriminatory against francophones considering that the official language of the province is French. Many agreed that they have nothing against francophones learning and mastering the English language, but the job requirement for being fluent in English should not be tolerated.

This issue led to more critiques about discrimination against francophones in the workplace around the province. The president of the *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (Confederation of National Trade Unions) explained how in English Cegeps, the board of directors is sometimes unable to offer services in French to their employees. She characterised this reality as unacceptable and one that should be promptly remediated. What many speakers tried to throw light upon was not that English is an affliction to Québec society, but that too often non-anglophone speakers are discriminated against in a province where the official language is indeed French.

1.2 Critique

One recurring theme in the Bill 96 debates is on multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is defined as “the policy or process whereby the distinctive identities of the cultural groups within such a society are maintained or supported” (Oxford). However, certain speakers have not hesitated in denouncing it as social evil, whose only contribution is to delegitimise the French language in Québec. A main issue with this argument is that multiculturalism is not properly defined during the debates. What is meant exactly when employing this term? How much multiculturalism should Quebeckers repudiate? Should we forgo the delectable shish taouks and refreshing gelato for the sake of maintaining our French language? Multilingual individuals are applauded for the efforts and endeavours in their ability to speak multiple languages. It is therefore disadvantageous that society should try to suppress the learning of multiple languages. French is undeniably the official language of the province and should be learnt by all residents; however, no good will come from subduing other spoken languages, whether it be a heritage language, learning a new language for employment purposes or simply learning for the sake of learning. The Québec government should continue to promote the French language, but at the same appreciate the increasing importance and inevitability of multiculturalism and multilingualism. Wishing to eradicate multiculturalism is to open the door for discrimination and intolerance within society (Piller 2016). Based on the definition cited above, multiculturalism broadly defines the presence of different cultural groups within a society. A rejection of the latter could potentially open the door to discrimination against skin colour, languages spoken, accents and more. Because of the vagueness of multiculturalism, to advocate for its eradication is both unrealistic as well as perplexing when considering what approaches would have to be taken to reject it in its entirety. This demonstrates the importance of not using such a broad term like multiculturalism if it is not going to be debated in its entirety.

Even though francophones may work in English Cegeps and undoubtedly speak English, the fact remains that Cegeps, regardless of the teaching language, should be able to provide French services to employees or students. Cegeps fall under the Québec government jurisdiction as Québec institutions and cannot therefore avoid linguistic laws simply because they are an anglophone establishment. This is a source of concern for many as it implies that Bill 101 is not always respected and that workers cannot receive services from management in the official language of the province. Under the *Charte de la langue française*, it is stated that, “Every person has a right to have the civil administration, the health services and social services,

the public utility enterprises, the professional orders, the associations of employees and all enterprises doing business in Québec communicate with [them] in French” (*Charte de la langue française*, chapitre II, article 2). As such, even though the employees in anglophone Cégeps may speak English, it is their right to be accommodated in French should they choose so.

In a report from the Office québécois de la langue française (OQLF), it was found that there is a projected decline in the use of the French language as the main language spoken at home (OQLF, 2021). They attributed the causes to a decreased level of French acquisition in students, and an increased number of immigrants whose first language is not French. The proposed solutions by the Office québécois includes accepting more immigrants originating from francophone countries, and promoting an even geographic distribution of immigrants, to avoid a hyperconcentration in areas like Montréal. As such, the solutions proposed by the attendee were based on official reports and demonstrate a concern with the reduced use of French. This highlights the importance of ensuring that French is always accessible to all Québec citizens. It has been argued that the goal of French immersion for immigrants should be aimed at creating a sense of belonging within the Québécois community, and easy integration by promoting French as the dominant language (Sabourin & Belanger, 2011). This idea relates to Bill 96 and its attempts at increasing the use of French and promoting the French language in education. The suggestion that French classes be given at immigrants' places of work demonstrates a willingness to fully integrate newcomers within the francophone community.

Another issue with the proposed Bill is the reduction of francophones and allophones' admissions in anglophones Cégeps and Universities. A speaker explained that doing so would allow more anglophones access to higher education in English. The problem with this argument is that if good grades were once an important admission criterion, this would considerably reduce the importance of the notion of merit. If allophones and francophones have stronger grades and fit the requested criteria, they should be rewarded for their achievements by being admitted. Otherwise, the proposal should simply ban all allophones and francophones from attending English education altogether. The reason for wanting to reduce francophone admission to anglophone Cégeps lies in the strong correlation between the predominant language used in Cégep, and the predominant language used in the public and private spheres, such as socialisation and work, for example (Sabourin & Belanger, 2011). It was found that those who attend anglophone Cégeps were more likely to use English as their main language later on.

There exist mixed opinions regarding Cégep linguistic admissions. Therefore, it seems unreasonable that the government expects that reducing francophone admissions will solve the projected decline of French in Québec. Instead, should they not first tackle the decreased level of French acquisition that students are experiencing at school? Moreover, it seems that the problem of immigration has not been resolved either. The willingness to improve access to French classes and promote integration is a good first step, but it is still immigration of anglophones which, according to the OQLF, poses an important threat to the use of French in Québec. The assembly has not adequately demonstrated how reducing admissions in anglophone Cégeps would contribute to resolving these issues of projected French decline. Instead, it has raised concerns regarding the decreased importance of merit, and the relentlessness to fight broad terms like multiculturalism.

-Marina Koutsis, Second Language Education graduate student at McGill.

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