

Quebec groups already vowing to fight ban on religious garb

Famed civil rights lawyer Julius Grey would help any groups or individuals fight an eventual law on religious clothing, proposed by the incoming Coalition Avenir Québec government.

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"I would do whatever one could do to oppose such a law," lawyer Julius Grey told the Montreal Gazette about his opposition to a ban on religious clothing on teachers, police officers, judges and prison guards. *ALLEN MCINNIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Famed civil rights lawyer Julius Grey would help any groups or individuals fight an eventual law on religious clothing, proposed by the incoming Coalition Avenir Québec government.

On Wednesday, the party made it clear

(<https://montrealgazette.com/news/caq-will-fundamentally-change-quebec-legault-says>) that school teachers, police officers, judges and prison guards who wear outward signs of their religions will have to find another job. That's according to the CAQ's proposed law on secularism in the state — an attempt to “better integrate” immigrants. Premier-designate François Legault also said he would invoke the notwithstanding clause of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to implement such a ban.

“I'd be happy to challenge it if someone asked me, or to assist. I would do whatever one could do to oppose such a law,” Grey told the Montreal Gazette Thursday. “I'm uncomfortable with the idea of people losing their jobs.”

Grey explained that this is an issue of fundamental rights, and that people who say that teachers can just take off their kippa, turban or hijab when they walk into work, and put it on when they leave, don't understand the issue.

“If this is a sincerely held religious belief, you have no choice but to follow it,” he said. “I don't think it's a matter of choice, and I think that's where the error comes in.”

Grey said if the CAQ uses the notwithstanding clause to circumvent the charter, the only legal recourse will be to challenge the law before the United Nations Human Rights Committee (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/ccpr/pages/ccprintro.aspx>). That would ensure that Quebec would garner international headlines.

Others also vowed to fight the ban, including the Association des juristes progressistes. In a statement (<http://www.ajpquebec.org/communiqué-ajp-interdiction-signes-religieux-caq/>), the group of progressive lawyers warned Legault that it would fight such a ban in court, adding that it is an attack on fundamental rights.

Angela Mancini, the chairperson of the English Montreal School Board, said she too intends to fight against such a ban.

“The EMSB wishes to convey how, as an educational institution which fosters respect among our students, we can in no way support this type of legislation, which violates the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. If enacted, this kind of legislation will force individuals to choose between government employment and a desire to wear religious apparel. It is a personal choice to wear such apparel,” she said in a statement. “The EMSB values the diversity of our students and staff, and respects their personal and religious rights, which are guaranteed both by the Canadian and Quebec Charters of Rights. We cannot be party to a proposed legislation which, if passed, runs contrary to what we teach our students insofar as tolerance and respect of individual rights and religious freedoms are concerned.”

Sylvain Mallette, the president of the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (<https://www.lafae.qc.ca/>) told Radio-Canada's Michel C. Auger (<https://ici.radio-canada.ca/premiere/emissions/midi-info>) Thursday his unions would also fight such a ban.

“We will defend the rights of our members,” Mallette said. “This doesn't at all correspond to reality. We have not received any complaints that teachers have been trying to convert people. This is a problem that doesn't exist.”

He said the government should be more focussed on improving the education system.

“The last thing that our public schools need is another psychodrama,” he

said. "Banning religious signs won't give more services to youth and young adults. It will only create instability and insecurity."

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