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Opinion

Joe Ortona: Stop the name-calling, Mr. Legault, and focus on issues

The EMSB is not "radical." English-speaking Quebecers are looking to help build a welcoming society where everyone feels at home.

Joe Ortona • Special to Montreal Gazette
Sep 16, 2021 • 2 hours ago • 3 minute read • [Join the conversation](#)



Premier François Legault "seems willing to do anything to deflect attention from legitimate opposition to his proposed

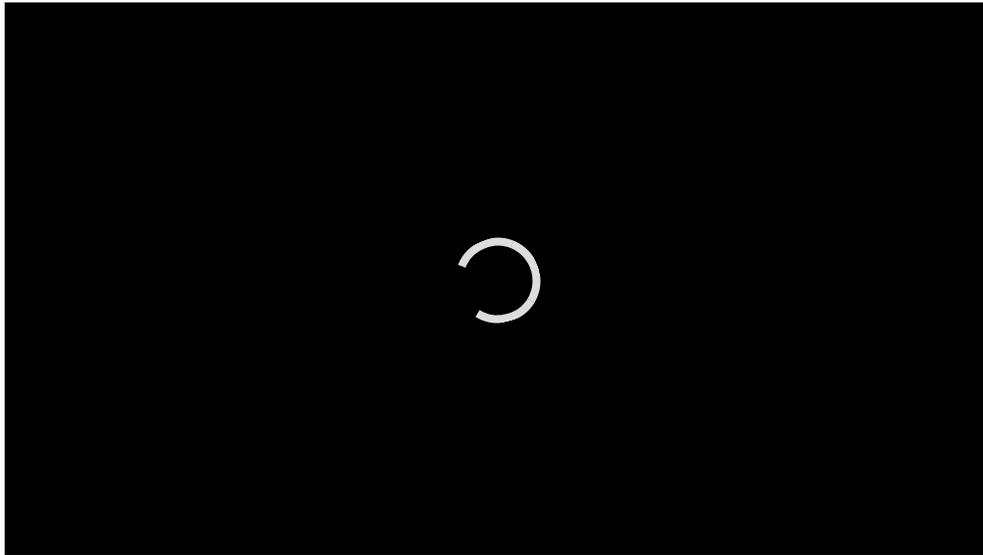
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It is clearly easier to resort to name-calling than to address the English Montreal School Board's opposition to Bill 96.

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Over the past two weeks we have been vilified as radicals by our premier, slammed during the federal leaders debate and now condemned in a resolution in the National Assembly.



On Sept. 1 we passed a resolution that was rescinded on Sept. 11, when we adopted a new resolution confirming our concerns with Bill 96 while deleting the controversial reference to a "Quebec nation." Yet, Premier François Legault's government nonetheless chose to have the National Assembly adopt a motion condemning our original resolution.

From our perspective the only reason for this behaviour is that the premier seems willing to do anything

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We stood up against Bill 21 because the ban on wearing religious symbols by our teachers conflicted with our values and our mission and with those of all Quebecers as expressed in the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. It has had a negative impact on our staff and on the culture in our schools and centres and has forced individuals to choose between government employment and a desire to wear religious apparel. We have had to refuse employment to some qualified candidates and promotions for others. And, of course, many have simply not applied.

Most importantly it sends a message of intolerance and exclusion to our students and their families.

Similarly, Bill 96 with its preemptive use of the notwithstanding clause to once again override the Quebec charter, runs counter to our societal goal of promoting our peaceful co-existence in a pluralistic Quebec where French is the common language. Our vision at the EMSB is of an inclusive Quebec where people of all backgrounds have the opportunity to contribute and where our diversity is celebrated.

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The EMSB supports the promotion of French. We are proud of our French immersion program and the steps we have taken to ensure our graduates are able to live and work in French. And we support a universal right to French instruction, which is proposed in Bill 96.

But Bill 96 has issues beyond what the Quebec Community Groups Network has called the creation of a charter-free zone. These include but are not limited to the following:

- We join our colleagues from Eastern Townships School Board, the English Parents' Committee Association, the Quebec Association of Independent Schools and the Quebec Federation of Home School in calling for maintaining the status quo with regards to access of children of temporary workers to English schools. While the number of students involved is relatively small, enrolment in English schools has been declining for the last four decades and any further restrictions on attendance hurts our school system. It also will impair efforts to recruit talent to our province.
- Only those members of the English-speaking community who are declared eligible for English education will be able to receive certain government services in English. And then the bill restricts the provision of certain services in English to newcomers to the first six months after their arrival in our province.
- Representatives of the Office québécois de la langue française will have the right to conduct search-

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- Limits the services municipalities can provide in English. Knowledge of English will not be a criteria for hiring employees, and new penalties will be created on provision of services in a language other than French.

The bottom line is that Bill 96 does not reflect the kind of Quebec we want to live in and build together. We are not radicals. We are simply English-speaking Quebecers looking to work with our neighbours to build a welcoming society where all of us feel at home.

Joe Ortona is chairman of the English Montreal School Board.

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