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Quebec / News / Local News

Legault describes EMSB as 'radical' after board's Bill 96 resolution

EMSB chair Joe Ortona backpedalled on the resolution's objection to Quebec's nationhood after being dropped from Ensemble Montréal's slate of candidates.



Michelle Lalonde, Montreal Gazette

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Premier François Legault, seen in a file photo, said he was pleased by a decision by Montreal mayoral candidate Denis Coderre to drop EMSB chairman Joe Ortona as a candidate in the Montreal municipal election. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Quebec Premier François Legault publicly suggested Tuesday that the English Montreal School Board had become a “radical” organization after it was reported the school commission wants the federal government to refer Quebec’s overhaul of provincial language laws to the Supreme Court.

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The English-language school board wants to challenge Bill 96 — the Legault government’s proposed revision of the Charter of the French Language — whose changes include the recognition of French as the province’s only official language and the constitutional recognition of Quebec as a nation. The board is calling upon the federal government to refer the legislation to the Supreme Court of Canada to test its legality.



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nation.

The premier said he was pleased by a decision Tuesday by Montreal mayoral candidate Denis Coderre to drop EMSB chairman Joe Ortona as a candidate in the municipal election and said it seemed as if the EMSB had become a “radical group.”

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“I recognize Quebec as a nation, as does our political party,” Ensemble Montréal Leader Denis Coderre said in response to an EMSB document challenging Quebec’s nationhood. The Montreal mayoral candidate is seen at Jean Talon Market on July 15, 2021. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

Coderre removed Ortona from his slate of candidates Tuesday morning, shortly after Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet called the EMSB document “an insult” in a news conference held on the steps of the Supreme Court in Ottawa.

The EMSB issued a statement Tuesday confirming its council of commissioners has adopted a resolution calling on the Quebec government to withdraw Bill 96, and calling on the federal government to “refer the bill to the Supreme Court of Canada for a ruling on its legality.”

“Quebec is not a ‘nation,’” reads one of the “whereas” clauses of the EMSB’s resolution, quoting Jon G. Bradley, a retired associate professor from McGill University.

“It never has been. Its status is recognized by the United Nations as a province within the nation of

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Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet, seen in a file photo, said the EMSB document is an "insult." PHOTO BY CHRISTINNE MUSCHI /Reuters

Blanchet is asking Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau and Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole to formally pledge that should either of their parties form the next government, they will not contest Bill 96 once it becomes law.

In a statement, Coderre said Ortona never informed Ensemble Montréal of the EMSB's intention to take issue with Bill 96.

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EMSB chairman Joe Ortona, seen in a file photo, has been dropped as a candidate for Ensemble Montréal in November's municipal election. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

“It’s unacceptable,” Coderre said in a communiqué. “The protection of the French language is part of our fundamental values, one we have shown so publicly on many occasions. ... I recognize Quebec as a nation, as does our political party.

“The document of the English Montreal School Board, headed by Mr. Ortona, totally goes against the values of our party.”

Ensemble Montréal will replace Ortona with Gabriel Retta as the party’s city council candidate in the district of Loyola, in the borough of Côte-des-Neiges—Notre-Dame-de-Grâce.

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“I was glad to see Denis Coderre show the door to his candidate from the English Montreal School Board,” Legault told reporters Tuesday. “I think they are disconnected. It’s as if that group has become a radical group.”

Ortona released a statement Tuesday, expressing disappointment in both the reaction to the EMSB’s adoption of the resolution and in Coderre’s decision to drop him as a candidate.

But he also backpedalled significantly on the resolution’s objection to Quebec’s nationhood.

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He said he will be recommending to his fellow commissioners that they modify the resolution and delete references to any objection to Quebec being referred to as a nation. But the EMSB will continue to urge the Quebec government to withdraw Bill 96.

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The commission opposes the bill, Ortona stressed, because it increases the restrictions on access to English schools for the children of people temporarily working in Quebec, increases the powers of the Office québécois de la langue française to conduct searches and seizures without warrants, restricts access to CEGEPs and restricts the use of English in the legal system.

He said he will continue to advocate for an “inclusive Quebec” and to promote the interests and views of English-speaking Quebecers. He added that he is considering running as an independent in Loyola.

“As for my candidacy in the Loyola district, it was not by accident that I chose to run there,” Ortona said. “My reputation as a defender of English rights was well known by Ensemble Montréal. Many supporters want me to stay in the race as an independent and I am now in reflection where that is concerned.”

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