

April 10, 2019 - 5 Nissan 5779

POLITICIANS UNITE TO FIGHT QUEBEC'S "CRAPPY" SECULARISM BILL

By **Janice Arnold, Staff Reporter** - April 9, 2019



Gathered to declare their common front against Bill 21 are Mayor Mitchell Brownstein, left, MP Anthony Housefather, D'Arcy McGee representative Elisabeth Prass, Mayor William Steinberg, Montreal councillor Marvin Rotrand, and Montreal West Mayor Beny Masella.

An anti-Bill 21 coalition of West End elected municipal, provincial and federal officials became strained at its launch when one member compared the proposed secularism law to "ethnic cleansing."

Hampstead Mayor William Steinberg denounced the Quebec bill as "racist" and "despicable" and tantamount to "ethnic cleansing" at a press conference held at Côte St-Luc City Hall on April 5.

The purpose was to declare the coalition's opposition to an "unjust" bill that violates rights protected in the Canadian and Quebec charters and to demand the government withdraw it. A "rally for religious freedom" outside Côte St-Luc City Hall, organized by the coalition, was announced.

Steinberg thinks the bill is discriminatory because it "favours non-believers and Christians" and perhaps others because they are not required to wear religious garb like some Muslims, Jews, and Sikhs are.

The consequence, which he feels is not unintended, will be people from those groups not coming to or leaving Quebec, resulting in a more "homogeneous" population. He drew a parallel with the imposition of religion in such countries as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

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Côte St-Luc Mayor Mitchell Brownstein quickly distanced the other coalition members from Steinberg's remarks. He did not allow a media question to Steinberg on whether language many would consider inflammatory might hurt the cause of those opposing the bill, which was introduced in the National Assembly by the Coalition Avenir Québec government on March 28.

Brownstein is concerned immigrants and other minorities might feel they have to leave the province to enjoy equal rights in employment.

D'Arcy McGee Liberal MNA David Birnbaum later called on Steinberg to apologize for his remarks about ethnic cleansing.

"They were hurtful, deeply inappropriate and unworthy of his passionate opposition to Bill 21, which I share," Birnbaum stated on April 9.

"The premier has his dog and whistle out and is dividing Quebecers in his defence of this very bad law. Let's not help him do that."

Steinberg tweeted earlier that, "I regret that some media have seized on the term 'ethnic cleansing' without fully explaining my position. Bill 21 will lead to fewer religious minorities coming to Quebec. Those minorities already here will consider leaving so that their children will have equal employment opportunities instead of being discriminated against. Quebec will become less diverse and more homogeneous. I don't believe most Québécois want that."

He told reporters he was not suggesting Quebecers are racist. "I have a lot of confidence in Quebecers," he said. "The vast majority are very tolerant, reasonable people...I believe Quebecers will reject the law once they fully understand the implications."

Steinberg has been mayor since 2005 of Hampstead, a town of about 8,000.

Others at the press conference were Montreal West Mayor Beny Masella; Marvin Rotrand, an opposition Montreal city councillor for Côte des Neiges-Notre Dame de Grâce; Elisabeth Prass, bureau chief to Birnbaum, and Mount Royal Liberal MP Anthony Housefather.

In the audience was Joe Ortona, vice-chair of the English Montreal School Board, which passed a resolution that it will not comply with the bill if it becomes law.

In February, Côte St-Luc unanimously resolved that prohibiting public servants from wearing religious symbols was unconstitutional and that it would never terminate or punish an employee whose religion required them to do so.

Brownstein was less categorical at the press conference. "We hope to stop the law before it comes into effect," he said. "We are not here today to talk about the hypothetical."

The rally, called for April 14, was described as a first step in mobilizing a broad-based public outcry against the bill that Quebec Premier François Legault wants to put through before the parliamentary session ends on June 14.

Brownstein noted that Côte St-Luc successfully coalesced with other jurisdictions and civil groups in protesting the Parti Québécois's 2013 charter of secular values that died before it reached a vote.

He said there are a large number of people who would be directly affected by the new bill living in the areas represented by the officials leading the West End coalition.

Housefather said it is "unacceptable in Canada that any child be denied the right to believe he can become anything" because of religious garb.

As a federal elected official, he feels it is appropriate to become involved in provincial lawmaking because "the federal government has an obligation to protect minorities wherever they are in Canada." He said religious prohibition is also "contrary to the core philosophy of the Liberal party."

Housefather, who chairs the House of Commons justice committee, indicated that the inclusion of the federal charter's notwithstanding clause in the bill to pre-empt any legal challenge is particularly troubling to him.

Prass read a statement from Birnbaum that "ensuring the neutrality of the state is vitally important. That ensures the equality of all, but this awful bill will do exactly the opposite. It will tell some Quebecers that they are not as equal as others...it is unworthy of the Quebec that I love and is effectively illegal when applied to the Quebec and Canadian charters of rights. Together, we will use all means legitimately available to oppose it."

Rotrand, a Montreal city councillor since 1982, was blunt. "In plain English, this is a crappy law with so many contradictions in it." What's more, "it's an invitation to intolerance," he said.

He plans to vote with the official opposition Ensemble Montréal on its motion later in the month that would seek to exempt the city's employees from the law's effect.

Rotrand noted that the bill names lawyers and notaries who plead on behalf of the city as subject to the ban on religious symbols, as well as police and judges.

All the officials stressed that opposition to the bill should not be portrayed as anglophones and other minorities versus the francophone majority. They all agreed opposition is growing among all sectors of the populace.

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