

Don Macpherson: Bill 101's poisonous effect on Quebec politics

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Supporters in favour of Quebec's proposed charter of values take part in a march in Montreal, Saturday, October 26, 2013. Bill 101 arguably made possible the ill-fated, anti-hijab "charter of values" of the former PQ government, and the anti-niqab bill of the present Liberal one, Don Macpherson writes. **GRAHAM HUGHES / THE CANADIAN PRESS**

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"The children of Bill 101" have got the message.

Those are the first- and second-generation immigrants required to attend French school by Bill 101, the Quebec language law adopted 40 years ago Saturday.

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In a documentary shown Thursday on Radio-Canada's news channel, ICI RDI, some of them said that, even though they speak French fluently, and even if they have lived in this province all their lives, they don't feel Québécois.

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That's because they're often reminded that they aren't.

Cathy Wong, who is of Chinese-Vietnamese descent, said that although she speaks French (and writes it well enough to have a column in *Le Devoir*), knows Quebec's history and has Québécois friends, people still speak to her "as if I were a foreigner and still personify a form of threat."

Bill 101 has probably gone as far as practically possible toward making French the "common language" of Quebec; the corrected 2016 census data recently released by Statistics Canada indicate that the proportion of Quebecers who report that they can speak French has stabilized at more than 94 per cent.

It has reduced the English-speaking community, by diverting immigrants away from it and helping to create a climate inhospitable to anglophones.

Yet, even while it discouraged some English-speaking federalists from moving here, and encouraged others to move away, Bill 101, passed by a Parti Québécois government, actually weakened the Quebec independence movement.

It eliminated the linguistic grievances that had driven the movement, and it did so without Quebec's having to leave Canada.

And Bill 101 has had another lasting effect on the province's politics, a pernicious one that is seldom recognized.

Over the 40 years of its existence, Bill 101 has come to be generally accepted, if only grudgingly by some as a necessary evil, to keep Quebec within Canada. And with that has come a gradual acceptance of a divisiveness that poisons the province's politics.

Bill 101 has alienated many in Quebec's largest cultural minority, the English-speaking community, from the provincial government that has wielded its power against it, from engagement in provincial politics, and from identifying with their province.

The divisive ideas on which Bill 101 is based have become entrenched.

One is simply that Quebec needs protection against some of its own people. Another is that the majority is justified in using its political power to legislate whatever protection for itself against the minorities it deems necessary, limited (for now, at least) only by the Canadian constitutional Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Bill 101 was not the first Quebec legislation treating minorities as an internal threat. But it's Bill 101 that has endured, long enough for Quebec to get used to it, and the identity politics it represents.

In recent years, successive PQ and Liberal governments alike have casually proposed amendments to the province's own legislative Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms to restrict minority freedoms.

Bill 101 arguably made possible the ill-fated, anti-hijab "charter of values" of the former PQ government, and the anti-niqab bill of the present Liberal one.



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And it has become normal for a moderate, mainstream newspaper such as La Presse, in an editorial, to worry that there are too many people in Quebec with mother tongues other than French.

This is over a slip of six-tenths of a percentage point, over five years, in the proportion of Quebecers with French as their mother tongue. That was all that was left of a supposed "decline" in French in the 2016 census, after StatsCan corrected errors in its original data.

Still, La Presse sees a problem, but it's not people's behaviour, not even what they speak in the privacy of their homes, as what PQ leader Jean-François Lisée calls "the language of breakfast." It's simply their identity, and their presence.

Those children of Bill 101 have got the message. And it's not just that they're not Québécois. It's that they're the enemy.

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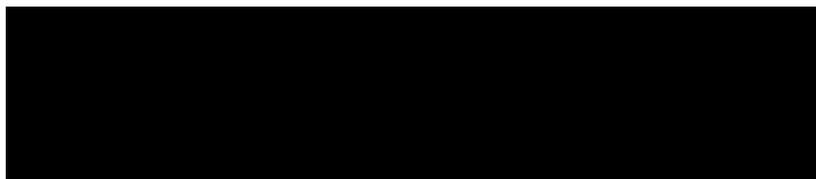


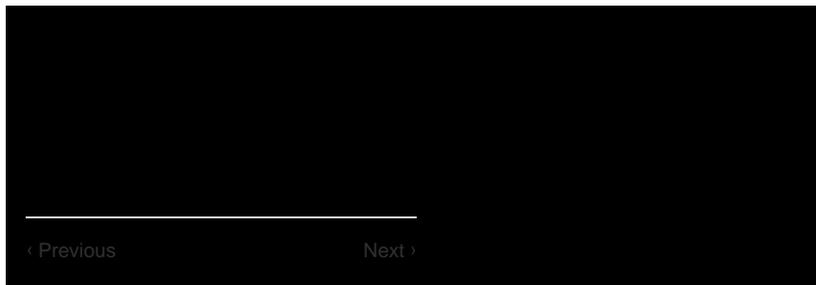
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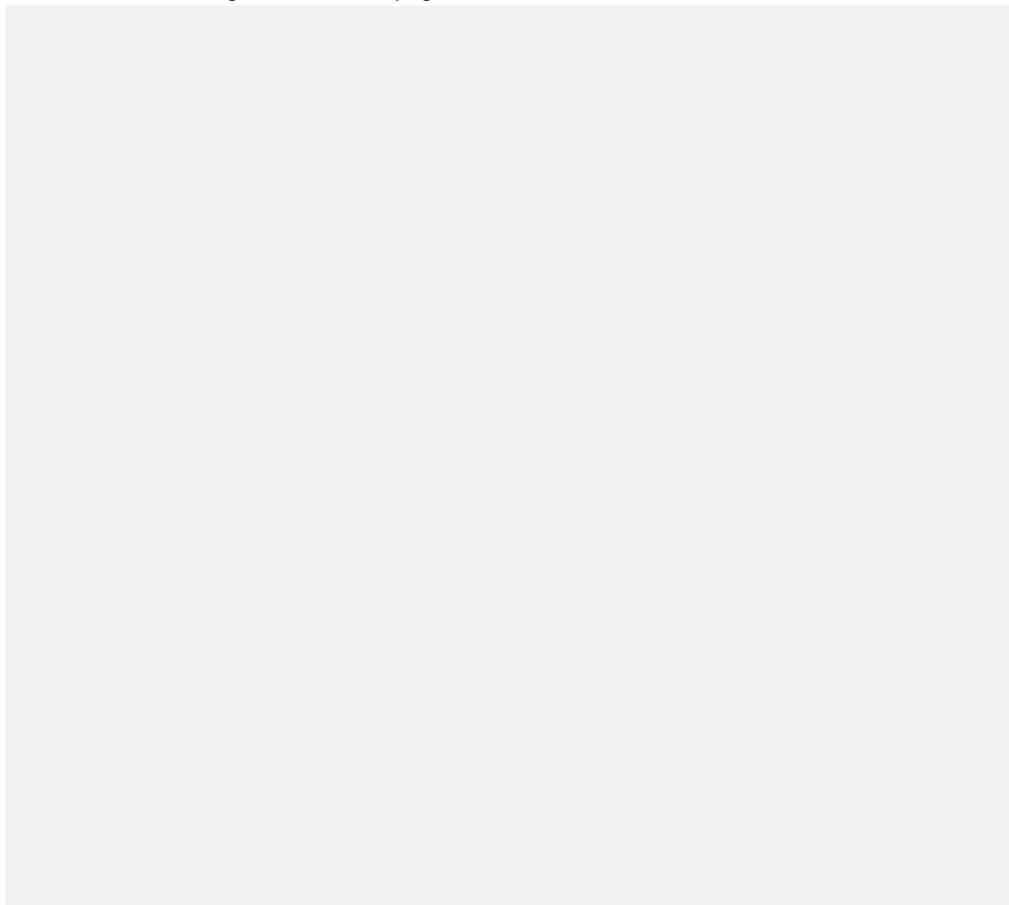
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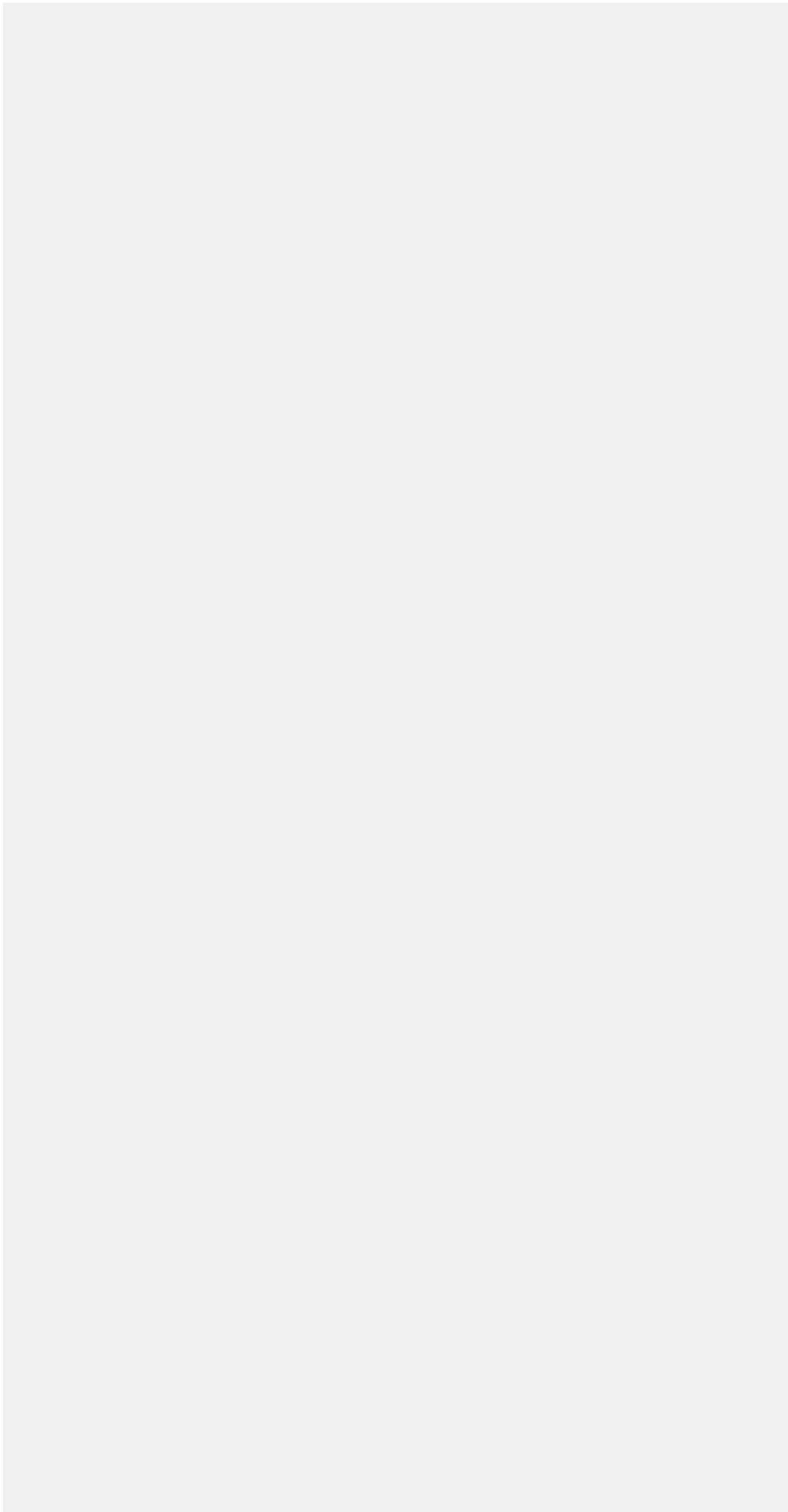


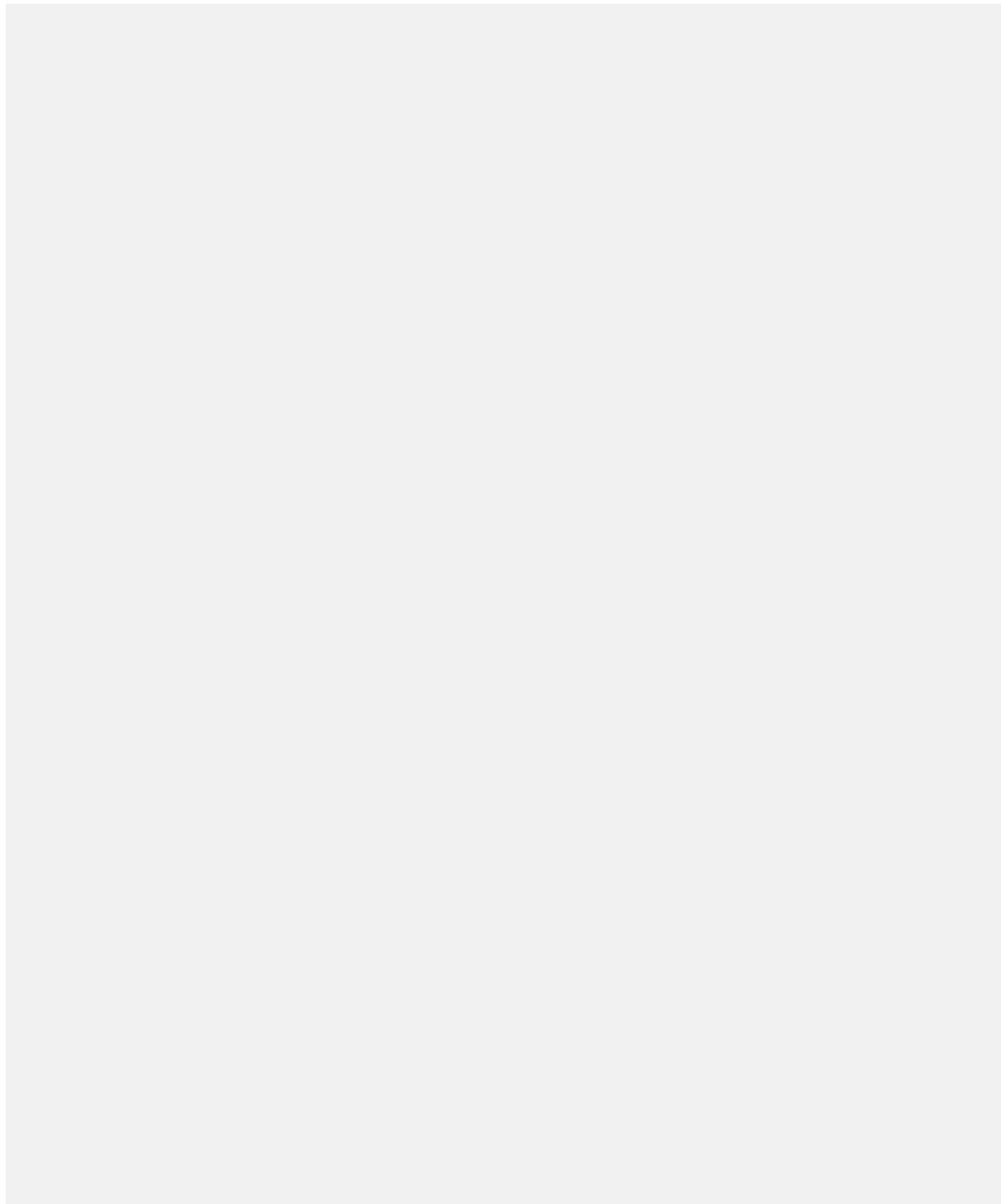


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