

French fluency a prerequisite to public office under PQ government

BY MARIAN SCOTT, THE GAZETTE AUGUST 22, 2012



A PQ government would make anglophones and immigrants ineligible to run for public office unless they spoke French, leader Pauline Marois told reporters Tuesday.

Photograph by: Paul Chiasson, The Canadian Press

MONTREAL - Under a Parti Québécois government, anglophones and immigrants would not be allowed to run for public office unless they spoke French, leader Pauline Marois told reporters Tuesday.

“This is what we call the right of eligibility, and it seems to me that out of respect for our language, which is the official language of Quebec, it is normal that someone who wants to represent citizens should speak this language,” Marois said during a press conference at a provincial nurses’ federation.

Marois said that if elected, she would reintroduce a controversial PQ bill requiring all new citizens of Quebec to learn French. But the new bill would go even further than the initial version of Bill 195, tabled in 2007.

To be eligible to run in provincial or municipal elections, a non-francophone would have to speak French well enough “to be able to explain his ideas, explain his point of view,” Marois said.

The proposed law would apply to people born and raised in Quebec, including members of First Nations, as well as immigrants.

“The principle is not whether you come from elsewhere or you come from here. The principle is that you have to be capable of communication with the citizens,” Marois said.

The PQ leader declined to explain how the government would test would-be candidates’ French skills. Would there be a written test, an oral one, or both?

“A written or an oral test has not been planned. We could look at the tools that already exist,” she said.

Civil-rights lawyer Julius Grey blasted the proposal as “part of the new identity face this campaign has taken and it’s very regrettable.”

“I think it’s a remarkably bad idea and it’s one that is manifestly unconstitutional and there’s absolutely no doubt that people like myself ... will be in court the next day after it’s passed,” Grey said.

He said the proposed law would infringe Section 3 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which provides the right to participate in democratic affairs and does not have a test.

Grey compared the proposed law to the Jim Crow literacy tests given to African-Americans in the U.S. South to prevent them from voting.

“It’s quite shocking that you would interfere with the electorate’s choice,” Grey said. He noted that voters are quite capable of rejecting candidates whose language skills are not up to scratch.

“The attempt by the government to get in and stop them from running is unjustifiable. I can’t see any good that comes of it, nor is it fair, nor does it have anything to do with democratic principles,” he added.

Marois said candidates would not have to be “perfectly bilingual, but at least out of respect for the citizens of Quebec (they) would have to know the rudiments of the French language.” She noted that her own English “is deficient, as you know, but I think I succeed in expressing my thoughts quite well anyway, so people could be inspired by my experience.”

The PQ tabled Bill 195 at the height of the debate over the “reasonable accommodation” of religious minorities. It would have required immigrants to have a working knowledge of French before they could become citizens of Quebec. The bill was not adopted because the PQ was not in power at the time.

Marois said the details of the law would be worked out after the election.

“Obviously, this law will be debated. There will surely be a parliamentary commission,” she said.

In Monday night’s debate, Premier Jean Charest accused the PQ leader of infringing on non-francophones’ democratic rights.

But Marois said she saw no problem with limiting the political rights of language minorities since immigrants need to have a working knowledge of English or French to obtain Canadian citizenship.

Landed immigrants 18 to 54 must take a test to become citizens. It evaluates general knowledge of Canada and the ability to speak basic English or French.

Marois has also pledged to **limit access to English CEGEPs** to those eligible for English schooling, and to **bar civil servants from wearing religious garb such as a Muslim head scarf or Jewish skullcap**. However, she said government workers would be allowed to wear a discreet cross and that the crucifix in the National Assembly would remain because it is part of Quebec's heritage.

Grey said he found it unfortunate that the **PQ has been focusing on divisive questions of identity** rather than addressing more important matters. "All of those things have taken away from the real issues, which are medicare, education, social justice, the economy and corruption," he said.

At the press conference at the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé (FIQ), Marois promised to give nurses authorization to write prescriptions for ointments to treat wounds and to order X-rays and lab tests. Earlier, she spoke to supporters at a pizza restaurant on St. Denis St. in the Latin Quarter.

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