

Philippe Couillard reaches out to exiled anglos: 'We need you'

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Language issues have popped up at the Liberal youth convention with a clutch of Montreal Liberals proposing to loosen up the French Language Charter and allow francophones into the English system. JACQUES BOISSINOT / THE CANADIAN PRESS

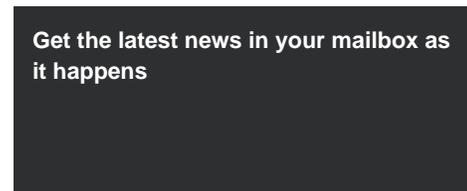
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SHERBROOKE — Premier Philippe Couillard has launched an appeal to English-speakers who left Quebec to come home, saying “we need you” to build a better future.



And to anglophones still here, Couillard said they should stick around, hop on Quebec’s surging economic bandwagon and never feel like second-class citizens.



But his message, made in a speech wrapping up a two-day Liberal youth wing policy convention, came on the heels of an acrimonious party debate on a possible softening of the Charter of the French Language.



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Despite an emotional appeal by anglophone delegates who said the measure is needed to help save the declining English school system, delegates rejected a resolution calling for pilot project in which normally inadmissible francophones would be allowed into the English elementary school system.

The language debate at the convention, held this weekend at Bishop's University in Lennoxville, lasted about 30 minutes with 400 delegates listening politely as Montreal delegates made their pitch.

Some said they were looking to the party to send a strong signal they were welcome in Quebec and in the party.

"There's a huge problem in this province and it's been going on and on and on," Nikolas Dolmat, a McGill University economics student and youth delegate from Montreal said addressing the plenary in English.

"The English school boards in Quebec are dying. My high school is less and less used every year. It's a really sad state of affairs. Can we just try this?"

Dolmat let it all hang out, going on to say the Liberal Party is one of the few places he, as an anglophone, feels accepted.

"When I am walking around on the street I'm accepted," he said. "The second I open my mouth, someone will say you have an anglophone accent. I'm sneered at. I'm despised.

"There are places I don't feel accepted to go into. If I leave McGill. If I leave the West Island, if I talk to people and make an effort to speak French, I'm looked down upon."

Informed of Dolmat's remarks following his speech that included the English shout-out, Couillard was aghast.

"It's unacceptable," Couillard said at a news conference. "The English language is part of who we are, it's part of our history.

"It's not because we (francophones) we're treated bad in the past — I remind you there were moments in our history where bad things were said to people speaking French in the streets — but that's no reason to do the same and behave the same way."

Noting anglophones are more and more bilingual, he added people should feel free to use English in the streets.

"It's not acceptable to sneer at someone because of who he is, what colour the skin, what language is spoken," Couillard said.

Dolmat was not the only one to pour his heart out at the plenary microphone Sunday.

Delegate Coleb Owusu-Acheaw tried to sell the idea Quebec should be more, not less, bilingual.

"Bilingualism is a reality, either accept it or hide behind the charter," he said. "The door is right there — just walk through it."

Matthew Quadrini, chairperson of the Montreal young Liberal policy commission that pitched the motion, appealed for compassion and



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understanding, saying despite media reports the goal was not to reopen the charter.

He said the pilot project wouldn't affect more than 1,000 students.

"The goal here is to recognize anglophones contributed to the development of Quebec," Quadri said. "Bill 101 had a positive effect in Quebec, which allowed it to reaffirm its francophone culture. One of the other effects was the slow decline in anglophone institutions and the persons who register."

But their efforts ran head on into other delegates who disputed the anglophone pitch that was essentially one of demographics. A delegate from St-Hyacinthe said he was concerned about exposing francophones to English at such a young age.

"Yes, it's a pilot project, but it won't solve anything," the delegate said, getting loud applause.

Later, seeing which way the wind was blowing, Quadri tried to withdraw the motion before it could be rejected, but he failed and the vote proceeded.

At his news conference, Couillard tried to smooth the waters and was asked repeatedly to explain his decision to devote a large chunk of his speech wrapping up the convention to the English-speaking community.

As he did in an interview with the Montreal Gazette last spring, Couillard conceded relations between his government and the community have not been perfect. The crisis at the [McGill University Health Centre](#) has not boosted confidence, either.

"I don't want us to drift apart from one another," Couillard said. "I want to be totally sure that they know their premier is the premier of all Quebecers. I want to make sure the message is loud and clear, yes, of course, they are first-class Quebecers."

Couillard insisted his speech was written before the events Sunday on the plenary floor. He made no mention of the fact the Coalition Avenir Québec opposition party is eating into traditional Liberal support and a general election looms in 2018.

The message to come on home, however, had all the markings of a communication strategy.

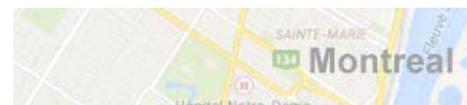
"We need you for a better future for all Quebecers," he said. "To English-speaking Quebecers, I say, this is your home, this is your moment," Couillard said. "Let's build it together."

"I know you will talk to your friends who have to decided to live elsewhere and go away from Quebec, tell them to come back to Quebec. This is the moment to come back and build Quebec, the new Quebec with us."

He made it clear if the English community had hopes of an easing of Quebec's restrictive language laws by the party they massively vote for, they can go on dreaming.

"Bill 101 is a tool which assured linguistic peace in Quebec," he said. "I understand the worries. Let's see what we can do. But I return to the conclusion of the vote. Modifying Bill 101 is out of the question. I want to be

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very clear on this.”

Also sent out to play bad cop was Luc Fortin, the minister responsible for the language charter, who said the result of the vote was “coherent” with the government’s policies on language.

“We have attained a linguistic balance in Quebec,” Fortin said.

But David Birnbaum, the Liberal MNA for the riding of D’Arcy McGee, told reporters before the vote it’s clear the charter has made things more difficult for the English school system.

“To me there’s an absolutely legitimate point to be made about the fact there are two phenomena here which both deserve consideration,” he said in an interview. “There’s no doubt Quebec’s English school system is in a precarious state. That should matter to all Quebecers.”

Quadrini and Dolmat both told the Montreal Gazette later they were happy the motion got debated and have no plans to quit the party because it failed.

“I think there was a recognition some of the actions which exist can make the anglophone community feel excluded and there’s a willingness to correct it,” Quadrini said. “This was not the best way of doing it. I’m not disappointed at all. It’s something to work on.”

“No one walked in there thinking it (the motion) was going to pass,” Dolmat said. “At the end of the day, we’re still going to work together.”

In other decisions, the Liberal youth did push through a series of resolutions calling on the government to reform the curriculum in the education system and to create a new professional order for teachers.

The youth convention is often seen as as the kick-off of Quebec’s political season. Couillard, however, continued to play coy on a possible fall cabinet shuffle.

But he was clearly looking ahead to the election, boasting at length about his government’s economic record.

“Our team took Quebec out of the economic doghouse and made it a powerhouse in Canada,” Couillard said.

And he put a new spin on the old Liberal campaign slogan “maîtres chez nous,” saying thanks to the Liberals Quebecers now can have “confiance chez nous.”

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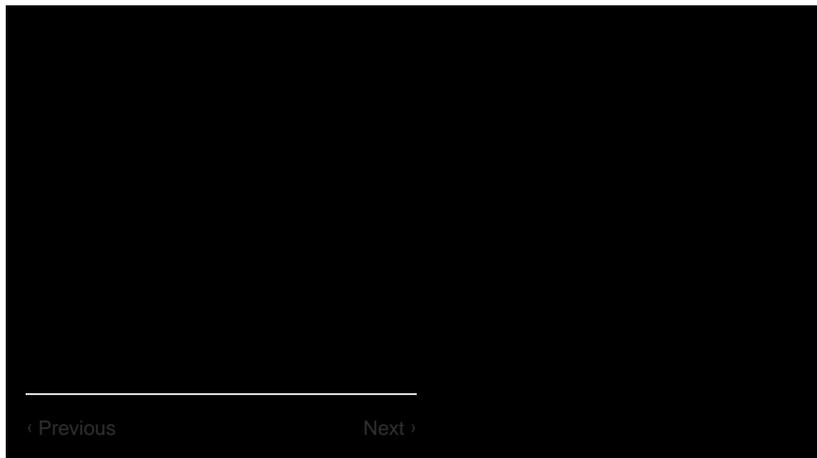


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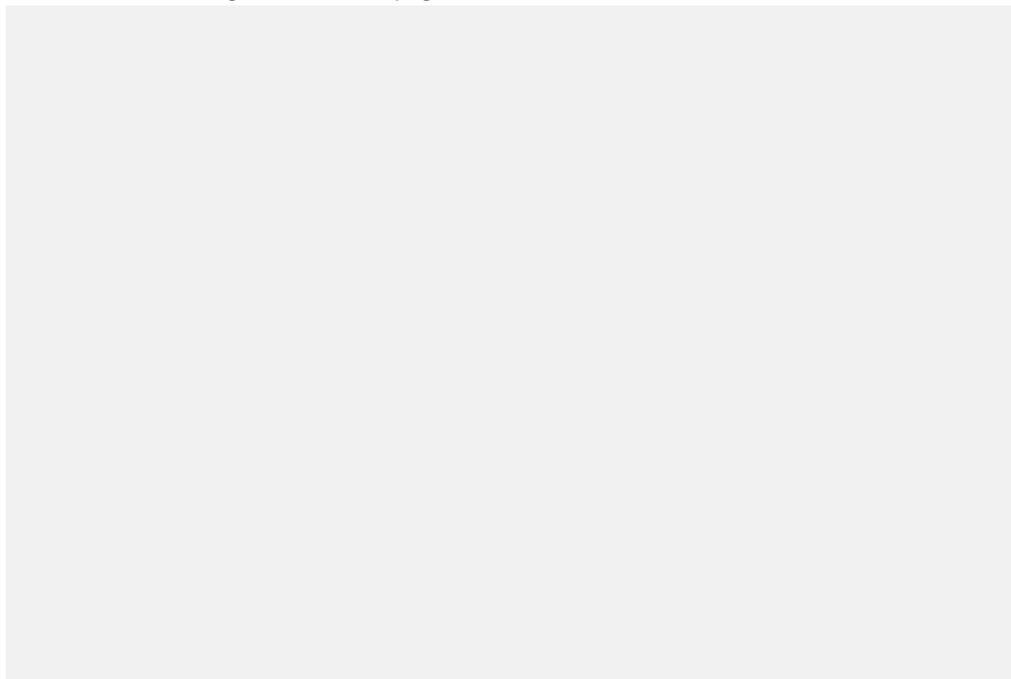
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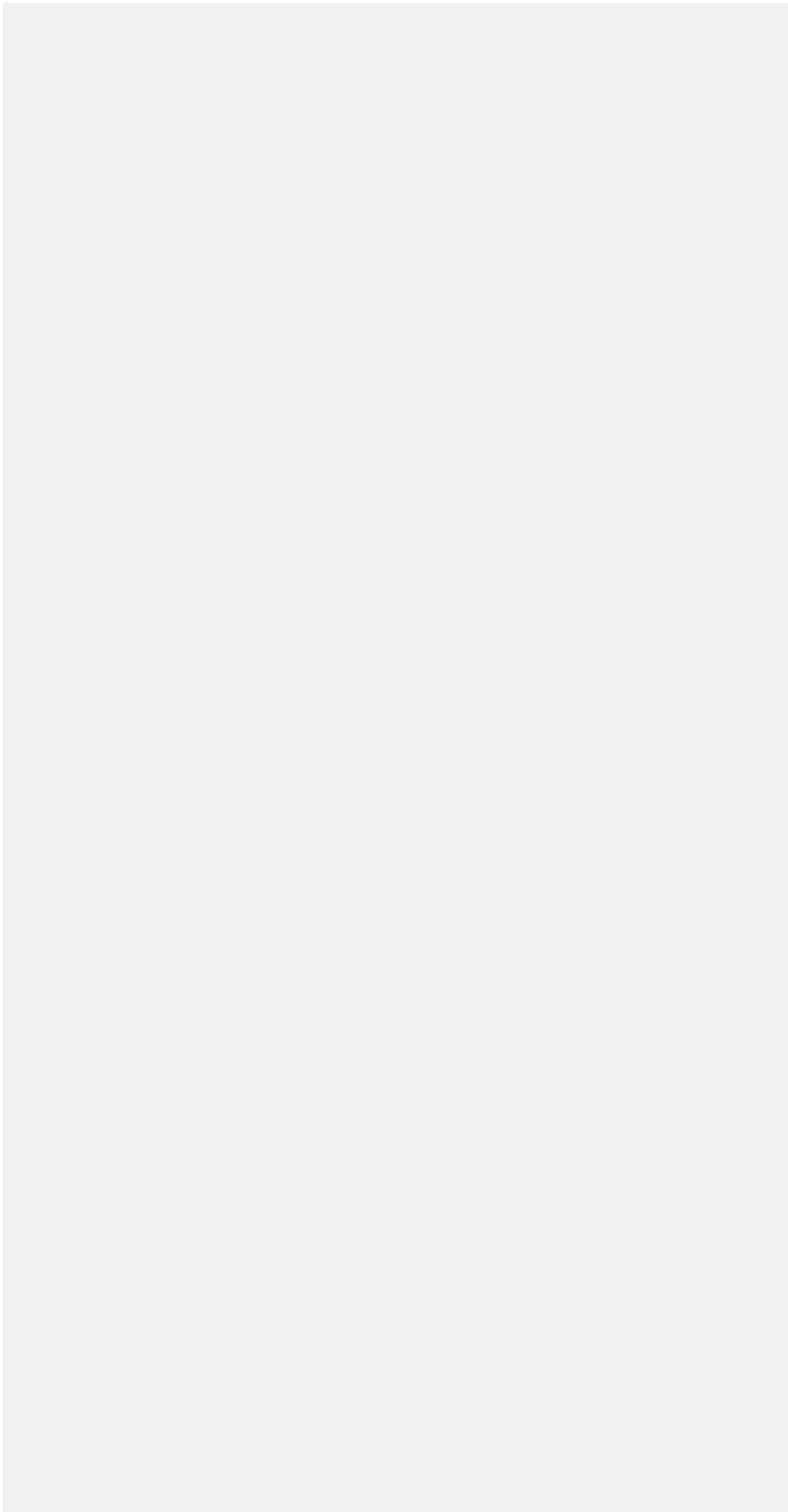
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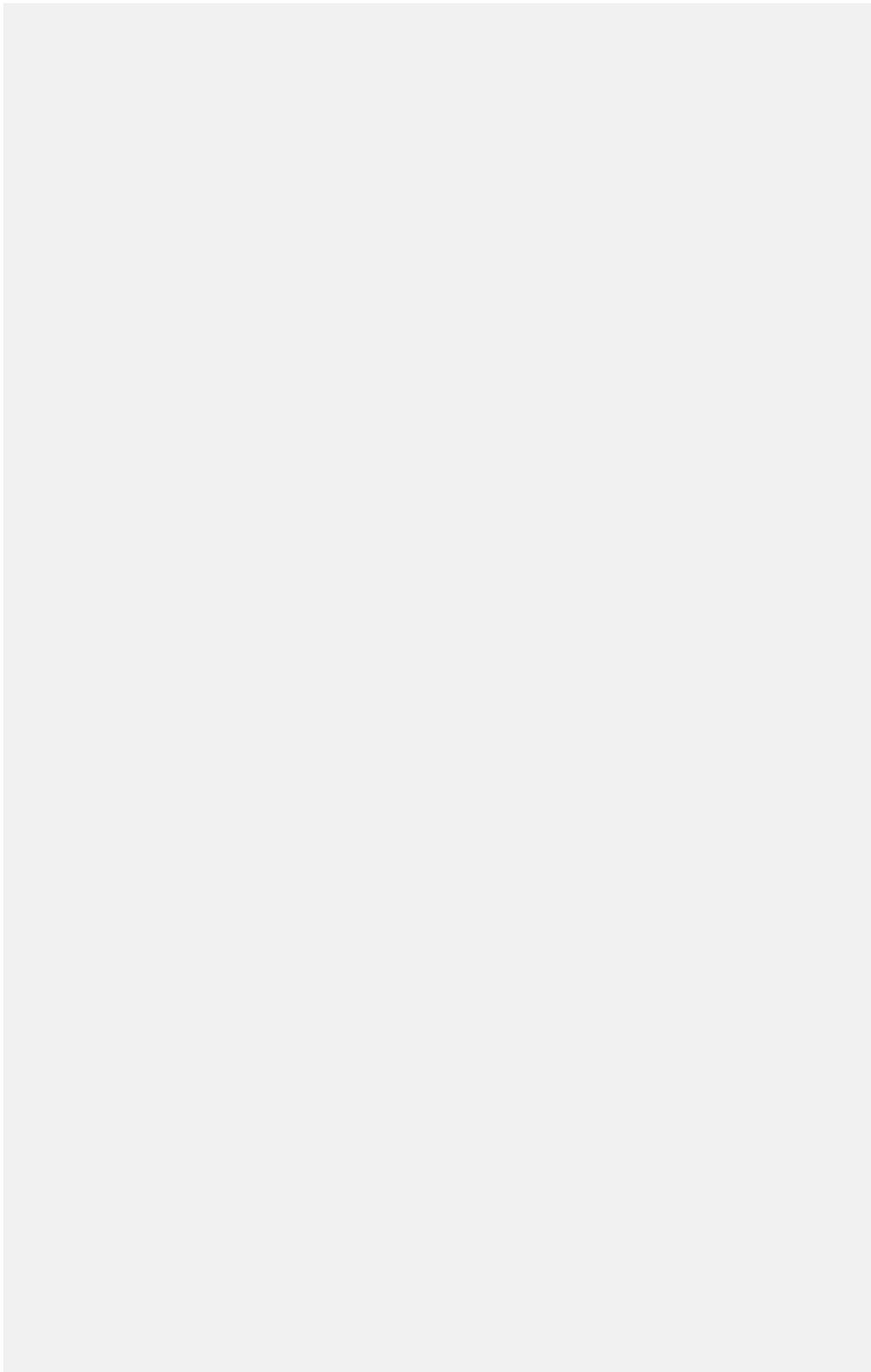


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