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EMSB chair, Jolin-Barrette spar over French language and whether Quebec is a nation

Joe Ortona tells justice minister that many anglophones "don't feel valued or included" in Quebec.

By **Andy Riga**

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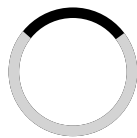


Joe Ortona, chair of the English Montreal School Board, told Justice Minister Simon Jolin-Barrette:

“The question you should be asking is this: How is it that so many anglophones don’t feel represented in this nation (of Quebec) — and why so many don’t feel valued or included?” PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette files

Quebec’s nationhood, the French language and religion were the focus of a testy exchange Tuesday between the province’s justice minister and the head of its largest English school board.

Joe Ortona, chair of the English Montreal School Board, told a National Assembly hearing that the proposed Quebec constitution drafted by the Coalition Avenir Québec government undermines the education system, centralizes power, threatens minority rights and fails to reflect the province’s diversity.



STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Justice Minister Simon Jolin-Barrette pressed Ortona on whether Quebec is a nation, citing a 2021 EMSB motion that described it as a province, not a nation.

“I recognize that Quebec forms a nation within a country called Canada,” Ortona said, adding that Indigenous nations also exist within Quebec’s borders.

He said the EMSB later removed the reference to Quebec not being a nation from the motion, whose main purpose was to oppose Bill 96, legislation that tightened the province’s language laws.

Ortona pushed back on the broader framing of the hearing.

“The question you should be asking is this:
How is it that so many anglophones don’t
feel represented in this nation — and why so
many don’t feel valued or included?”

Jolin-Barrette also asked whether French is
“the only official and common language of
Quebec.”


Ortona said French is the majority language
but called it “legally false” to say it is the
only official language, noting that under the
Canadian Constitution, courts and the
National Assembly operate in both French
and English.

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The proposed constitution would bar school
boards and other public bodies from using

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public funds to challenge laws the provincial government deems to “protect the Quebec nation.”

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The English school system and the CAQ government have repeatedly clashed.

Lawsuits have targeted an attempt to abolish English boards and legislation that toughened language laws and barred boards from hiring teachers who wear religious symbols on the job.

The EMSB’s challenge to Bill 21, the secularism legislation, will be heard by the Supreme Court of Canada in March.

Known as Bill 1, Jolin-Barrette's proposed constitution stipulates that if the right to equality between women and men conflicts with freedom of religion, equality takes precedence.

Jolin-Barrette asked Ortona whether equality between women and men should take precedence over freedom of religion "in case of conflict between the two."

"We don't have that conflict in our schools, so I don't know what conflict you're talking about," Ortona said, noting that recent cases in which religion caused conflicts — including at Bedford school — have occurred in the French public system.

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“The rare cases that have happened were in institutions where you abolished elected representation and community representation,” he added, referring to the CAQ’s abolition of French school boards.

Quebec replaced French boards with government-controlled school service centres. English boards remain only because of successful legal challenges, though the matter could ultimately reach the Supreme Court of Canada.

Jolin-Barrette also asked about the EMSB’s spending on legal challenges to CAQ language and secularism laws. The last publicly available figure, \$1.3 million covering only the secularism challenge, dates from 2024. Ortona said he would provide updated numbers to the committee.

Responding to a question from a Liberal MNA, Ortona criticized the minister’s line of questioning.

“I find it very revealing that, with the small number of anglophone groups speaking, government MNAs are not taking the opportunity to understand what their issues

are, their concerns, what they are
contesting in Bill 1. The questions that were
asked have nothing to do with any of that.”

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Supported by groups promoting Quebec
nationalism, the French language and
secularism, Jolin-Barrette’s plan has drawn
broad opposition, with detractors noting it
was drafted behind closed doors and
cautioning that it could concentrate too
much power in government hands.

Ortona is also the president of the Quebec
English School Boards Association,
representing nine boards serving 100,000
students across the province.

In a brief submitted to the committee

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studying the proposal, the QESBA called the constitutional plan an “attack on school boards.”

The association said since coming to power in 2018, the CAQ government has “favoured exclusion, conformity and restrictions on access to the detriment of its fundamental responsibility towards education. It has been concerned with dress codes and religious symbols rather than its fundamental mission: academic success.”

It complained that the proposed constitution would “allow the government to order school boards to reject alternative funding sources, such as federal funds for culture, and to prohibit school boards from participating in federal parliamentary processes.”

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