THE GLOBE AND MAIL

# Quebec's anglophone minority faces declining political clout

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Joe Ortona, chair of the English Montreal School Board.
ANDREJ IVANOV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The protest is small but agitated. A few dozen opponents of Quebec's proposed language law are gathered in a park in the traditionally anglophone neighbourhood of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, and the speakers are having trouble managing the crowd.

"Are we 'angryphones?'" asks Irwin Rapoport, one of the organizers, hoping for a resounding "No!" Instead, a good number of protestors own up to the epithet. "Yes!" they yell.

They are angry at the government of Premier François Legault for introducing Bill 96, which aims to curb the use of English in the province and rewrite the constitution to declare Quebec a French-speaking nation – "paving the way," said one speaker, to "dictatorship."

But they are also upset at something relatively novel: the support of their traditional allies, the federal and provincial Liberals, for a bill many English-speakers see as a violation of their rights. "Quislings," says Hugo Shebbeare, another organizer.

It is nothing new for Quebec's anglophone community to fiercely oppose a strengthening of the province's language regime. But this time, they are alone, and they know it. No major political party at any level of government has denounced the bill outright. More than that, during their last government, Justin Trudeau's Liberals proposed a reform of the federal language regime that would also emphasize the protection of French within Quebec.

## A diminished Quebec Liberal Party fights to survive

The admission last week by Michael Rousseau, CEO of Air Canada, that he has lived in Montreal for 14 years without learning French angered many Quebeckers across the linguistic spectrum and elicited a days-long political outcry that has again put English speakers on the defensive. In a blistering statement, Marlene Jennings, a former Liberal MP from Montreal and now president of Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN), blamed the airline executive for inflicting "lasting damage" on the anglophone community, at a time when it needs friends more than ever.

"We might have once expected and received support for our minority community," she said in an earlier interview. Now, "we can't really say that we've got active advocates among the provincial political parties."

That shift is a reflection of declining political and demographic weight. The anglophone share of the Quebec population, now about 10 per cent, has dwindled over the past several decades. Native English speakers left the province in hundreds of thousands between the 1970s to the early 2000s, driven by the rise of the Parti Québécois and francophone nationalism. The provincial Liberals have not always been a reliable bulwark against these

trends – it was Liberal premier Robert Bourassa who invoked the notwithstanding clause in 1988 to continue requiring most outdoor commercial signs be exclusively in French – but today many anglophones feel especially isolated.

The contents of Bill 96 – including a cap on enrolment in English-language junior colleges, lower thresholds for the use of French by small- and medium-sized businesses, and restrictions on requiring English in job postings – have fuelled that sense of embattlement. "People are concerned that they're losing their children and grandchildren to Toronto," said Mitchell Brownstein, mayor of the heavily Anglo suburb Côte Saint-Luc. "They're very, very nervous."

The election campaign of Joe Ortona, chair of the English Montreal School Board, illustrates how politically marginal opposition to Bill 96 has become. The lawyer and self-proclaimed defender of Anglo rights was dropped as a candidate by mayoral aspirant (and former mayor) Denis Coderre after the school board passed a resolution calling on the provincial government to withdraw the language bill. Mr. Ortona ran for city council as an independent in the heavily-anglophone Loyola district, but he felt sidelined by the press and political class. He complained to a group of protestors recently that "the francophone media has ignored me completely since I was ousted. It's like they want to pretend I don't exist."

Prominent lawyer Anne-France Goldwater.

ANDREJ IVANOV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Not for the first time in Quebec, rhetorical excess has plagued the fight against language legislation. In hearings held by the QCGN about Bill 96 – which will have to be reintroduced after the Premier convened a new session of the National Assembly – the prominent lawyer Anne-France Goldwater said enforcement measures in the law would create a "new Gestapo." The comparison to Nazi Germany's secret police was roundly condemned by political leaders, but in a recent interview, Ms. Goldwater, who is herself Jewish, reiterated the analogy.

"When you demonize people, the end point is always the Holocaust," she said.

Far from being a fringe figure, Ms. Goldwater is a bicultural celebrity in Quebec who has pleaded before the Supreme Court and once hosted a *Judge Judy*-style TV show. "I have a Hispanic husband, I'm an Anglo woman, our common language is French," she said, in her office overlooking the wealthy anglophone enclave of Westmount. "We're on the toilet, we poop in French."

As colourful as her opposition to Bill 96 can be – "They want to engage in a complete erasure of our language, culture, and way of life," she claims – Ms. Goldwater shares another quality with many Quebec anglophones: an abiding attachment to the province. It would take someone holding a gun to her head to make her move to Toronto, she said, calling it "the most boring, flat, constipated city." The truth is, she acknowledged, she's a Montrealer through and through. "I intensely love everything about living here."

That feeling of belonging is why few observers expect Bill 96 to trigger a major out-migration, as previous language laws have done. After forty years of living under a strict regime for the protection of French, most anglophones have adapted. The English-speaking community is no longer dominated by the old WASP ascendancy, Ms. Goldwater pointed out, but by the children of Jewish, Italian, and Greek newcomers who have known no home in Canada but Quebec. Notwithstanding Michael Rousseau, nearly 70 per cent of anglophones in Quebec are bilingual, according to census figures.

"The people who are still here, they're dug in," said Jack Jedwab, president of the Montreal-based Association for Canadian Studies, and himself a bilingual anglophone who is married to a francophone. "They've had chances to leave."

It helps that the linguistic reality on the ground in Quebec is generally far more harmonious than the debate playing out in newspaper op-ed pages and the floor of the National Assembly. When Mr. Jedwab was vacationing in Florida before the pandemic, he ran into François Legault in a supermarket. They knew each other slightly from their roles on opposite sides of the province's debates around federalism and language, and struck up a nice conversation.

"We were talking about Doug Ford, hockey, whatever – we took a couple pics," said Mr. Jedwab. "When we go to Florida, we're all Quebeckers."

For all that day-to-day bonhomie, some anglophones feel that the province is once again becoming a less friendly place for them, thanks to the Legault government. Sitting in his school board offices – built in 1961, at the pinnacle of anglophone power in Quebec – Joe Ortona said he feels like a lonely tribune for an increasingly lonely community.

"I received a lot of support from anglophones … saying: 'I feel that you're the only person who represents us. We don't feel that anybody represents us.'"

On election night, Mr. Ortona finished in fifth place.

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