

The *Rassemblement pour la laïcité* condemns the pretence of state secularism proposed by the Couillard government



Press Release

For immediate release

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Montréal, June 11, 2015 – The *Rassemblement pour la laïcité* (RPL, Alliance for Secularism) expresses its profound disagreement with the approach taken by the Couillard government to promote State neutrality and to counter the actions of jihadism in Quebec. The two draft bills (59 and 62) and the action plan presented by the government are clearly motivated by an avoidance of fundamental issues. They promote religiosity and censorship. They are completely at odds with the aspirations of the Quebec people for true secularism in the state and public institutions.

A Denial of Religious Neutrality of the State

Draft Bill 62 which declares state neutrality makes no reference whatsoever to the concept of secularism, nor does it promote separation between state and religions. Furthermore, the bill does not even rise to the minimal logic of the recent judgement of the Supreme Court of Canada concerning the reciting of prayers at Saguenay city council meetings. As it happens, the bill provides nothing that would protect the freedom of conscience of individuals within the state and public institutions. What is more, the proposed legislation “imposes a duty of religious neutrality” on public servants when on duty, while nevertheless allowing them to wear religious symbols. The RPL considers that this line of reasoning is completely inconsistent because every religious symbol, practice or sign transmits a message, very often a message of discriminatory values or obscurantist beliefs.

The ban on the niqab and the burqa when providing or receiving public services represents a minimal measure long awaited in Quebec, especially in light of the fact that these degrading and oppressive articles of attire are in no way prescribed by Islam. In addition, how can this draft bill approve the wearing of the chador by public servants? How can it freely allow the niqab and the burqa in municipalities? What kind of neutrality is it when the bill allows the maintenance of customs related to religious holidays in child care services, a practice which violates the freedom of conscience of the children of parents who are non-believers or of a different religion? Draft Bill 62 thus opens the door to all manner of religious or communitarian influences within public services, in violation of the equality of citizens and the universality of the public sphere. It also ignores completely the issue of the neutrality of elected representatives and the presence of the crucifix in the main chamber of the National Assembly, not to mention the financing of religious schools and various inappropriate fiscal exemptions.

Combating Hate Speech or Censoring Criticism of Religions?

As for draft Bill 59 which deals with combatting hate speech and speech inciting violence, it too poses serious problems. First of all, the bill offers no definition of what in fact hate speech would be, thus leaving this concept completely arbitrary. It mistakenly assumes (as does the action plan proposed to prevent radicalization) that the behaviour of young jihadists identified in Quebec is supposedly caused by Islamophobic or xenophobic statements. Such statements, the draft legislation would have us believe, drive young Muslims towards Islamist extremism. The RPL utterly rejects this explanation. In our opinion, the cause of such unfortunate reactions among the population is in fact the abusive practices of Islamism and jihadism which, for decades now, have been directed against women, homosexuals, democratic freedoms and free cultural expression. Muslim fundamentalism and Islamism themselves cultivate and encourage Islamophobia which, unfortunately, leads eventually to a rejection of the Muslim community in its entirety, a community which is nevertheless, in very large proportion, very well integrated into Quebec society.

There exist other forms of fundamentalism which cultivate this rejection, be they Catholic, Hassidic or Sikh. For this reason, the RPL affirms loudly and categorically the fundamental democratic right to criticize religions, as well as the right to blaspheme. Each and every citizen has the right to denounce the excesses of religions or of fundamentalisms. Why does this draft legislation include measures against “hate speech” when there are already provisions in the Criminal Code of Canada against defamation, hate speech and inciting violence? The RPL seriously questions the aims of this draft bill which are contrary to the goal of secularizing society. Is this a new form of muzzle the government wishes to impose in order to censor criticism of religions?

A Mediocre Plan to Prevent Radicalization

Finally, the action plan put forward by the government to counter radicalization is paltry and inadequate. It proposes in particular the creation of a radicalization prevention centre and a telephone service. However, it also says nothing about fundamentalist and Islamist rhetoric which is widely disseminated throughout Quebec society and which represents the “ideological nourishment” of jihadism. Any serious plan to prevent and combat radicalization must include a coordinated program by government and public institutions, in particular the school system, with the goal of deconstructing and countering fundamentalist and Islamist discourse directed at young Quebeckers, promoting secularism and respect for freedom of conscience and freedom of expression.

The *Rassemblement pour la laïcité* (Alliance for Secularism) is a coalition of 21 organizations, including the *Association humaniste du Québec* (Quebec Humanist Association), the *Coalition laïcité Québec* (Quebec Secularism Coalition), the *Association québécoise des Nord-Africains pour la laïcité* (Quebec Association of North-Africans for Secularism), *Libres penseurs athées* (Atheist Freethinkers), the *Mouvement laïque québécois* (Quebec Secular Movement) and *Pour les droits des femmes du Québec* (For Women’s Rights in Quebec). Its platform has been endorsed by more than 62000 persons.

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