

## Quebec's secularism reigns supreme

Michael Adams  
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Like Bill 101, Quebec's (in)famous language law, Bill 62 is likely to be remembered for a long time, both within Quebec and elsewhere in the country. The reason is that the bill highlights differences between Quebec, where secularism reigns supreme, and the multicultural ideology embraced by the majority of those living in the rest of Canada.

Premier Philippe Couillard's Liberal government is heading into a pre-election period and passed the law, which severely restricts the wearing of niqabs and burqas, to show Quebeckers that it cares about their core values.

A couple of generations ago, Roman Catholic Quebeckers en masse decided to no longer attend weekly service. After centuries under the religious domination of the church, the population flipped to secularism, as if overnight. The pews emptied, and good tee times became impossible to secure on the province's golf courses on Sunday mornings.

One of the major implications of this radical rejection of traditional religious authority was the consequent embrace of gender equality. No longer would the daughter who could not find a husband be sent off to the convent to spend the rest of her life in service of a patriarchal church, wearing a black-and-white habit that covered her entire body, save her face.

When Quebeckers, especially former Catholics, see a Muslim woman wearing a niqab or a burka that covers the face, either entirely or except for her eyes, they see both their great aunt and a victim of religious patriarchy. And they don't like it.

In this, they join their compatriots in France (and other Europeans) who have passed laws to ban a woman from wearing such clothing in public spaces, including on beaches where other women choose to go topless.

Canadians living outside Quebec may not like the idea of Muslim women wearing niqabs and burkas in public, but polls have found that a slim majority believe a ban is a bad idea, and no other province seems concerned enough to introduce legislation akin to Bill 62. One Ontario hospital, hoping to draw female talent, released an ad quipping that it cared more about what is in a woman's head than what's on it.

In the last federal election, when then prime minister Stephen Harper wished to deny a Muslim woman wearing a niqab the right to be sworn in as a Canadian citizen, public opinion, especially in Quebec, was initially with him. But then the Federal Court of Appeals weighed in, ruling that if she exposed her face to an agent of the Crown, she could be sworn in wearing her niqab.

This gesture, together with the "barbaric cultural practices" tip-line proposed by former Harper ministers Kellie Leitch and Chris Alexander, also initially attracted public support. But then many people began to realize that their initial reactions clashed with their deeper-held values of empathy and tolerance. If these few women – and they only number in the few hundred across the country – really want to wear this clothing and they do no one any harm, then why the fuss?

The backlash to the backlash redounded more to the benefit of the crafty Liberals than the moralistic NDP leader Thomas Mulcair. Justin Trudeau sensed in the general public – and especially among the four in 10 of us who are first- and second-generation immigrants – that tolerance of difference was more Canadian than imposing strictures on religious garb. If the courts say it's okay for a woman to wear a niqab, then so be it. A few years ago, the courts said it was okay for same-sex people to marry, and the rest of us quickly followed suit.

Canadians are generally open to immigration from around the world, believe newcomers are good for the economy, don't take away jobs from other Canadians and don't commit more crimes than others. Still, the majority of Canadians also believe that newcomers are not adopting Canadian values quickly enough, and those highly cherished values include gender equality and, in Quebec, secularism. Where do we go from here? The Liberals passed Bill 62 to show they understand the values of the Québécois. But I imagine latitude will be left in the enforcement of the law, allowing for the kind of reasonable accommodation proposed by philosopher Charles Taylor and sociologist Gérard Bouchard in their report on these issues a few years ago.

Why? Because most people will respect the rule of law as expressed in the Quebec and Canadian charters of rights and freedoms; and because many will also be reminded of the treatment of women such as Rosa Parks in the Jim Crow U.S. South, and may reflect that it isn't women dressed in niqabs, hijabs or otherwise clad who have done real harm to others, but rather young men of many faiths and no faith with a lot of hate in their hearts and a gun at their disposal. In Canada's pluralistic liberal democracy, that's the way values and democratic discourse have tended to mediate strident opinions.

**Michael Adams** is president of the Environics Institute and author of *Could It Happen Here? Canada in the Age of Trump and Brexit*