



Musée Holocauste Montréal Montreal Holocaust Museum

At the Montreal Holocaust Museum, we feel compelled to voice our deep concern regarding *Law 62: An Act to foster adherence to State religious neutrality and, in particular, to provide a framework for religious accommodation requests in certain bodies* adopted by the Quebec National Assembly on October 18th. We believe that this law will have a negative impact on the cohesion and relations between Quebecers of various faiths and origins. The stigmatization, stereotyping and denial of public service to the small number of Muslim women who wear face coverings, appears to us, unrelated to the stated purpose of Law 62.

As the only government recognised Holocaust museum in Canada, we welcome more than 16,400 visitors each year. Our mandate focuses on raising awareness of the consequences of antisemitism, hatred and racism and on the promotion of respect for diversity. Our educational programs reach tens of thousands of people each year. Our pedagogical tools, 20 of them, available on our website, were downloaded 68,000 times last year. Through this work, the Museum encourages members of the public to examine their own prejudices, and understand their effects. Rooted in the history of the Holocaust, we strongly believe that the fight against discrimination requires respect for differences, the promotion of human rights and openness to diversity today. That is our legacy.

It is from this perspective that we question how the deprivation of basic services including healthcare, education and public transit is coherent with the rights to freedom of religion and expression, the value of diversity or even the promotion of integration of minority and minoritised groups. Will a woman wearing a niqab be able to register her child for a municipal soccer program? Will she be able to participate in parent-teacher interviews? Will she be able to register for prenatal courses or go for a flu shot, or emergency services? It is for us, far from clear how we are protecting the State or the public and from whom and what. It is contradictory to at the same time develop a consultation on systemic racism, or a Forum Validating Diversity and the Fight Against Discrimination, and enshrine a new discrimination in law. The perceived threats to communication, public safety and identification used to justify this law have not been studied or evaluated. Thoughtful legislation and policy does not rest on presumptions, particularly those which stereotype, nor on public prejudice and fear. Adoption of legislation for which no regulations on application are defined is precipitous and creates uncertainty, for civil servants who will be asked to apply it, for the group targeted and for all minorities.

Above all else, religious neutrality of the State promises the protection, respect and equal treatment of each individual's religious practices. This means ensuring that governments do not favour or disadvantage any religious belief or practice. If a public administration is expected not to discriminate on the basis of religion, it is reasonable to assume that it is its duty to serve the recipients of its services equitably and fairly. An impartial official does not challenge State neutrality through her appearance, or wearing religious symbols. And a service user, how much less so? As a Holocaust museum, while cautious about facile analogies, we feel we must remind the public that hate and persecution during the Holocaust was predicated on historical antisemitism. Caution must be exercised when identifying symbols differentiating minorities as a risk. If we can codify rules which stereotype into law, if we increase the exclusion of a small minority, we legitimize dangerous perceptions.

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The recurring nature of these debates affects all minority groups. It encourages intolerance towards minority religious practices, and disparages difference by creating a false perception of threat. We reiterate the message we voiced in 2013: without respect for cultural differences and religious practices, we cannot respect human dignity. Social cohesion does not depend on cultural or religious uniformity, but on respect for all members of society. The theory of several groups in support of Bill 62, has been that it could be worse. That is not a good enough reason to support any law which violates the Human Rights Charter and our stated values as a society. At the same time as we condemn those who would go further, we have a moral obligation to defend these very fundamental rights, for all.

Strong leadership is needed to encourage understanding, and build bridges among all Quebecers. This law is likely to do the opposite.

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