

Coderre vows to protect Montreal's diversity

Mayors call proposal divisive, appalling and embarrassing

BY RENÉ BRUEMMER, GAZETTE CIVIC AFFAIRS REPORTER NOVEMBER 8, 2013



Montreal mayor-elect Denis Coderre said he would travel to Quebec City to reiterate the city's objection before a parliamentary committee and the leaders of the provincial political parties, including Premier Pauline Marois. He's seen here speaking to the press at city hall on Monday, Nov. 4, 2013.

Photograph by: Peter McCabe, The Gazette

MONTREAL — The mayors of Montreal and its neighbouring municipalities joined the chorus of dissent against Quebec's proposed Charter of Values bill Thursday, calling it divisive, appalling and embarrassing, and vowing to defy it.

Montreal mayor-elect Denis Coderre said he would travel to Quebec City to reiterate the city's objection before a parliamentary committee and the leaders of the provincial political parties, including Premier Pauline Marois. The bill hurts not only the city's social fabric but its economy as well, and he repeated earlier promises to challenge the bill in court, if it comes to that.

"There is no problem with having a neutral state and open secularism (where people can display religious symbols)," Coderre said. "Integration does not mean uniformity. We define this city by its diversity, and my role is to make sure we keep it."

Coderre cited a survey taken by the Conseil du patronat, Quebec's largest employers' group, which found 63 per cent of business owners opposed the charter and 82 per cent predicted it would have a negative effect on Quebec's image internationally. He said he would ask Montreal's newly elected city council to pass a motion opposing the charter as well as the agglomeration council, as they have done in the past.

Côte-St-Luc Mayor Anthony Housefather called the bill both harrowing and embarrassing.

"It's an absolutely appalling piece of legislation and I think it's something that would be laughed at in any other jurisdiction in North America," he said.

"It puts religious freedoms at a level where the state itself is imposing restrictions on people's individual expression of their religious freedom and their dress at work. Of course, while providing an exemption for whatever they consider to be Quebec's cultural heritage, such as the crucifix."

Housefather criticized the bill for putting the will of the Parti Québécois over that of local mayors and constituents.

"It devalues the rights of municipalities, hospitals, school boards, and the rights of elected officials at other levels of government and simply imposes their view of provincial government on everybody.

"The people of Côte-St-Luc did not elect Pauline Marois ... and whatever values she is talking about are not the values of Côte-St-Luc. This is the PQ trying to appeal to a segment of the electorate for their re-election, and it's appalling."

Hampstead Mayor William Steinberg said his municipality wouldn't even bother to apply for exemptions to the charter because that would give it a legitimacy it does not deserve.

"We will ignore it" if it is voted into law, he said. "Let them take us to court, I don't care — we can be the test case. We won't even consider the law. It's illegitimate, it's immoral and shameful and we will not co-operate with it at all."

None of Hampstead's public employees wear religious symbols, but many have asked if they could in protest if the law comes into effect. Certainly, said Steinberg, who calls Bill 60 the Charter of Shame.

Westmount Mayor Peter Trent said the PQ is trying to "manufacture discord and problems for ulterior motives ... for partisan reasons for the final goal for which the PQ was founded."

He predicted the party has gone too far, however.

"They've gone completely beyond reason and I think they will find such a negative reaction they will have to pull back."

For Housefather, the damage has already been done.

"This is one of the rare times I am so embarrassed by our provincial government," he said. "Rob Ford

is making Toronto a laughingstock. In my view this current Quebec government is making Quebec a laughingstock.

“It’s so sad. It’s just so sad.”

rbruemmer@montrealgazette.com

Twitter: renebruemmer

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Côte-St-Luc Mayor Anthony Housefather criticized the values charter bill for putting the will of the Parti Québécois over that of local mayors and constituents.

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