

# Row erupts over proposed 'charter for secularism' in Quebec

Posted: Thu, 16 Aug 2012

A proposal to adopt a 'secular charter' from one party leader has sparked controversy in Quebec ahead of the forthcoming elections on 4 September. The proposed charter would ban civil servants from wearing or exposing overt religious symbols — with the notable exception of the crucifix.

Centre-left Parti Québécois (PQ) leader Pauline Marois (pictured right) said the plan, aimed at ensuring public institutions are free of religious bias and symbols, would make an exception for the crucifix, which the PQ considers a symbol of Quebec's Roman Catholic heritage — a cultural symbol, not a religious one.

Marois said freedom of religion would be integrated in the charter. "Before having it contested, we will present it, debate it and adopt it. If it has to be contested, for now it's a hypothetical question. We will fight for what we need because we think this is essential for the public's well-being by taking its values and writing them in a charter."

Under such a charter, civil servants would not be allowed to wear conspicuous religious symbols but it has been suggested the Christian crucifix would be acceptable if worn discreetly. The crucifix at Quebec's national assembly would also remain. The latter proposal caused a rift in the party as another PQ candidate Djemila Benhabib said that for consistency, she would also like a PQ government to remove the crucifix. Benhabib has previously spoken out in favour of ban on prayers during municipal council meetings.

Ms Benhabib defended her stance by stating that the state should show no preference for any religion. Marois was quick to distance herself from the candidate's stance, but Benhabib said if elected, she would be ready to battle the issue.

Ms Benhabib's comments provoked a furious outburst from the Catholic Mayor of Saguenay, Jean Tremblay, who has been embroiled in a legal battle over reciting prayers during council meetings. During a radio interview on Wednesday he said "What's outraging me this morning is to see us, the soft French Canadians, being dictated to about how to behave, how to respect our culture, by a person who's come here from Algeria, and we can't even pronounce her name. They're making our culture and religion disappear everywhere. You don't realize that."

Benhabib was in fact born in Ukraine, to an Algerian father and Greek Cypriote mother. After an international upbringing she moved to Quebec in 1997. A rising star in the party, Benhabib is a staunch anti-Islamist who has authored a book warning about the dangers of multicultural acceptance.

In Montreal, some were asking for clarification to Pauline Marois' proposed crackdown on religious symbols.

"Would she really prevent a Sikh wearing a turban to work for the civil service? Does her policy apply to religious Jews and would it prevent them from serving in municipal councils or in the legislature because they have a skullcap?" said Marvin Rotrand, a member of Montreal's

executive committee.

Coalition Avenir Quebec leader Francois Legault was quick to criticise the proposals. "We have, all together, to learn from each other. And I think that Mme. Marois is going too far," said Legault

An editorial in the Montral Gazette called the plan "offensive" for denying rights and freedoms on the one hand to Sikhs, Jews, and Muslims but upholding them on the other for Christians.

Marois has also talked about the fact that many of Quebec 's institutions used to be based on religion.

"It's part of our heritage, but taking a step to ensure the state's secularity is not to deny what we are, but that we are at a new moment in our lives and believe the state's neutrality and the fundamental values, equality between men and women must guide us toward a life together in Quebec ," Marois said.

Some people have argued that the secular charter proposed by the PQ could hit a roadblock because it may go against the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which entitles people to freedom of religion and promotes multiculturalism in the country.

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