

Bill 21: 'We don't think that it's right what the government is doing'

About 400 people gathered at a rally in Côte St-Luc Sunday as politicians, community leaders and educators denounced the CAQ's secularism bill.

MARIAN SCOTT, MONTREAL GAZETTE Updated: April 14, 2019

It's what's
IN my head.
It's not
what's ON
my head.

C'est ce qu'il
y a DANS
ma tête...
pas SUR
ma tête.



About 400 people cheered and waved placards Sunday as politicians, community leaders and educators denounced Bill 21 at a rally in Côte St-Luc.

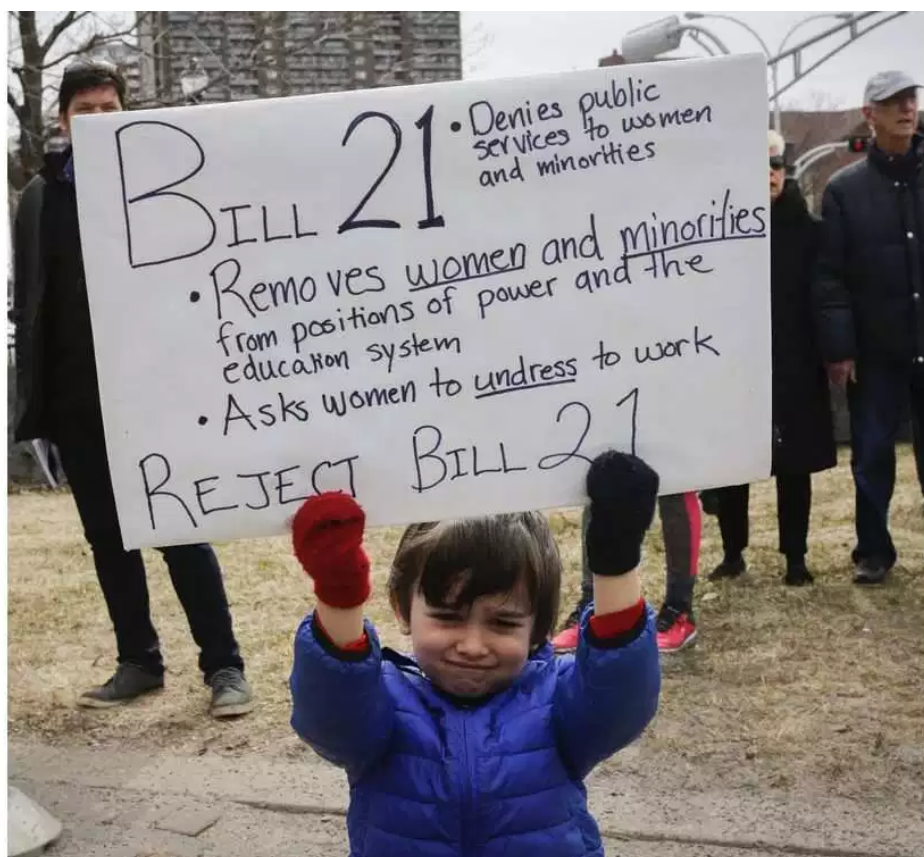
The secularism bill would “create two classes of citizens” and “legislate discrimination,” charged Lionel Perez, leader of Montreal’s municipal opposition and one of 16 speakers who took the podium.

“I say no. We say no,” he said to spirited applause.

Bill 21 would prohibit authority figures like teachers, police officers, prison guards, prosecutors and judges from wearing religious symbols like the Muslim hijab, Jewish kippah or Sikh turban at work.

Tolerance and the ability of people from different origins and faiths to live together peacefully are built into Quebecers’ DNA, Perez said in a passionate denunciation.

“Religious and ethnic diversity built Montreal and built Quebec,” he said.



Edmond Emad holds a sign at a Rally For Religious Freedom and against the CAQ government’s Bill 21 in Côte-St-Luc on Sunday, April 14, 2019. *JOHN KENNEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Perez, who wears a kippah, said he was born and raised in Montreal by immigrant parents who chose Quebec “for the promise of a better future, because they wanted to live in a safe and open society and because of the French language.”

“My kippah is my deep faith,” he said. “But it does not affect my ability to serve the needs of my constituents” or to contribute to Quebec society.

“My kippah is not an affront to a secular state. It’s proof that Quebec is open to the world,” he added.

GALLERY:

[GALLERY: BILL 21 PROTEST IN CÔTE-ST-LUC](https://montrealgazette.com/gallery/gallery-bill-21-protest-in-cote-st-luc)

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Julia Marsiglio and others listen to speakers at a Rally For Religious Freedom and agair government's Bill 21 in Côte-St-Luc on Sunday, April 14, 2019. Bill 21 proposes public e

Carolyn Gehr, a teacher at the English Montreal School Board, said she wears a head scarf because of her Jewish faith. The religious symbol has never interfered with her ability to do her job and asking her to remove it “would be asking me to change the way I practise my religion,” she said.

Robert Leckey, dean of law at McGill University, noted, "there's much to say about Bill 21 in legal terms."

"It is unprecedented to amend the Quebec charter in order to reduce the protection of rights," he said.

The bill would be impossible to apply, Leckey charged.

"It does not define religious symbols. It sets no standard clear enough to be the means for excluding people from employment or from denying clear advancement to current employees," he said.

He added that it's wrong to invoke collective rights to justify curbing individual rights, since freedom of conscience and religion do not pose a threat to Quebecers' collective rights.

Imam Salam El-Menyawawi quoted Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous line that no "democracy can long survive which does not accept as fundamental to its very existence the recognition of the rights of its minorities."

"There are many leaders who tried to engineer society. They failed," El-Menyawawi said, recalling the divisive debate over the proposed Charter of Quebec Values in 2013.

"Six years later, we are trying the same issues, expecting different results," he said.

Armand Richard and Susan Gaskell and their son, Zachary Richard, waved homemade placards as they listened to the speeches.

"We're here because we don't think that it's right what the government is doing," Armand said.

Zachary, 13, a student at Heritage Regional High School in St-Hubert, said the issue has personal resonance for him.

"I have a teacher myself who wears a kippah and a technician at school who wears the hijab," he said.

Zachary said it does no harm for a teacher to wear a religious symbol.

"Unless people are in the religion, I don't think it influences people that much what they wear," he said.

Hampstead Mayor William Steinberg, who raised a storm of controversy April 5 by comparing Bill 21 with ethnic cleansing, did not attend, to avoid being a distraction.

In a statement Thursday, he said he understood his words were “painful to some and it was not my intention to upset anyone, only to have people see the effects of an odious bill.”

“Sometimes strong words are necessary to open people’s eyes,” he added.

Montreal Mayor Valérie Plante, Premier François Legault and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau are among politicians who roundly condemned Steinberg’s comments last week.

Mount-Royal MP Anthony Housefather, D’Arcy-McGee MNA David Birnbaum, Côte-St-Luc Mayor Mitchell Brownstein, Montreal councillor Marvin Rotrand and EMSB chair Angela Mancini also addressed the rally.

Later, the Canadian Muslim Alliance also held a demonstration against the bill [at Place Émilie-Gamelin \(https://montrealgazette.com/news/demonstration-today-to-protest-bill-21-at-place-emilie-gamelin\)](https://montrealgazette.com/news/demonstration-today-to-protest-bill-21-at-place-emilie-gamelin).

On Monday, Plante and Perez will hold a press conference on a [bipartisan declaration \(https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/religious-symbols-montreal-to-rebuff-bill-21-in-bipartisan-declaration\)](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/religious-symbols-montreal-to-rebuff-bill-21-in-bipartisan-declaration) opposing Bill 21 at city hall. However, Plante has said unlike such suburbs as Côte-St-Luc, Hampstead and Montreal West, [she would not defy the law if passed. \(https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/bill-21\)](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/bill-21).

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