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EMSB changes resolution about Bill 96 that set off political firestorm

Chairperson Joe Ortona says reference to whether Quebec should be recognized as a nation was blown out of proportion by the media.

Paul Cherry • Montreal Gazette
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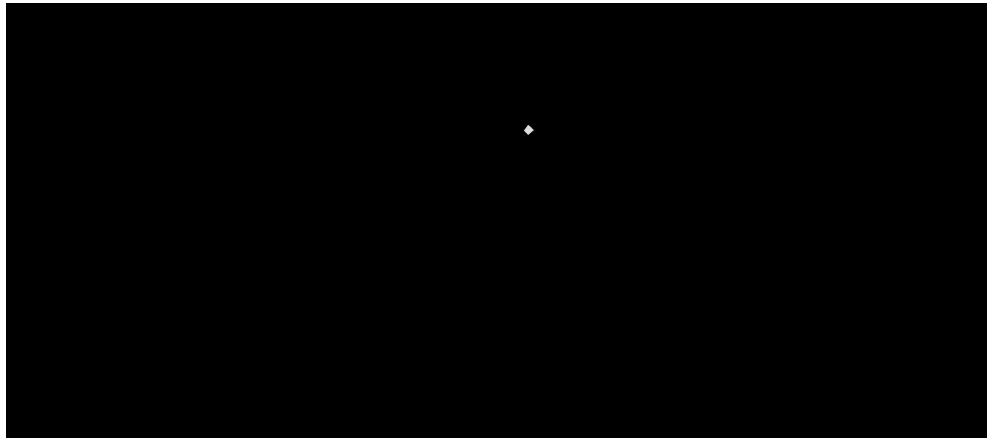
Because of the EMSB's resolution, chairperson Joe Ortona was dropped as a candidate for Denis Coderre's Ensemble Montréal party in the upcoming municipal election. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

In the face of a political backlash, but claiming its words were taken out of context, the English Montreal School Board has officially amended a resolution that included a quote saying Quebec should not be recognized as a nation.

The original resolution was adopted on Sept. 1 and called for Bill 96 — proposed legislation intended to reform Quebec's language laws — to be withdrawn. "Quebec is not a 'nation,' " read one of the "whereas" clauses of the EMSB's resolution, quoting Jon G. Bradley, a retired associate professor from McGill University.

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Bloc Québécois leader Yves-François Blanchet called the resolution an insult considering how, on June 15, the House of Commons voted in favour of his party's motion that Ottawa recognize Premier François Legault's attempt, through Bill 96, to affirm Quebec as a nation with French as its official language.

Legault referred to the EMSB as a "radical group" after he learned of its resolution. Other politicians weighed in, and Bill 96 became a topic in the federal election debates held this past week.

On Saturday, the resolution was amended during a brief meeting the EMSB held online. According to a statement issued after the meeting, the board "does not question the fact that Quebec forms a nation."

"The whole purpose of this meeting is to correct an unfortunate occurrence, and I think that's better than simply doubling down and maintaining a position that wasn't intended for the board in the first place," EMSB chairperson Joe Ortona said while responding to a question during the meeting.

He later told reporters the reference was taken out of context and blown out of proportion by the media.

"The resolution was six pages long. There were many statements and quotations in that resolution and one of them made reference to the question of Quebec being a nation, and that got a lot of media attention. But I want to be clear that in the conclusion of the resolution, there was never any statement of any kind with regards to the English Montreal School Board taking any position on that, or stating that Quebec is not a nation.

"In fact, what the resolution was stating was that Bill 96 was not necessary to protect the French language and should be withdrawn.

"We as an institution, of course, have always promoted the French language. We have some excellent bilingual schools and French-immersion schools, and we don't feel that the notwithstanding clause or these kind of restrictions (called for in Bill 96) are necessary to promote or protect the French language.

Ortona also noted that the resolution does not call for a legal challenge of Bill 96.

"The bill has not been adopted into law, and we haven't even looked at the possibility of challenging that. We don't know what the future holds. We'll have to see if the bill is adopted and what the bill is going to look like," he said.

When the story first surfaced, Ensemble Montréal leader Denis Coderre dropped Ortona as a candidate in the upcoming municipal election and said the EMSB's stance on Bill 96 "totally goes against his party's values." When asked on Saturday if he will still run as a candidate in the election, Ortona said he hasn't ruled the option out yet.

During the Saturday morning meeting, board member James Kromida said it was unfair that Ortona was singled out and made to pay a price for the resolution.

"When we looked at this resolution and we voted, honestly, we didn't look at the nation part of it. We

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not happy when I am called a radical. The community wants to survive, and that's not radical in any shape or form."

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