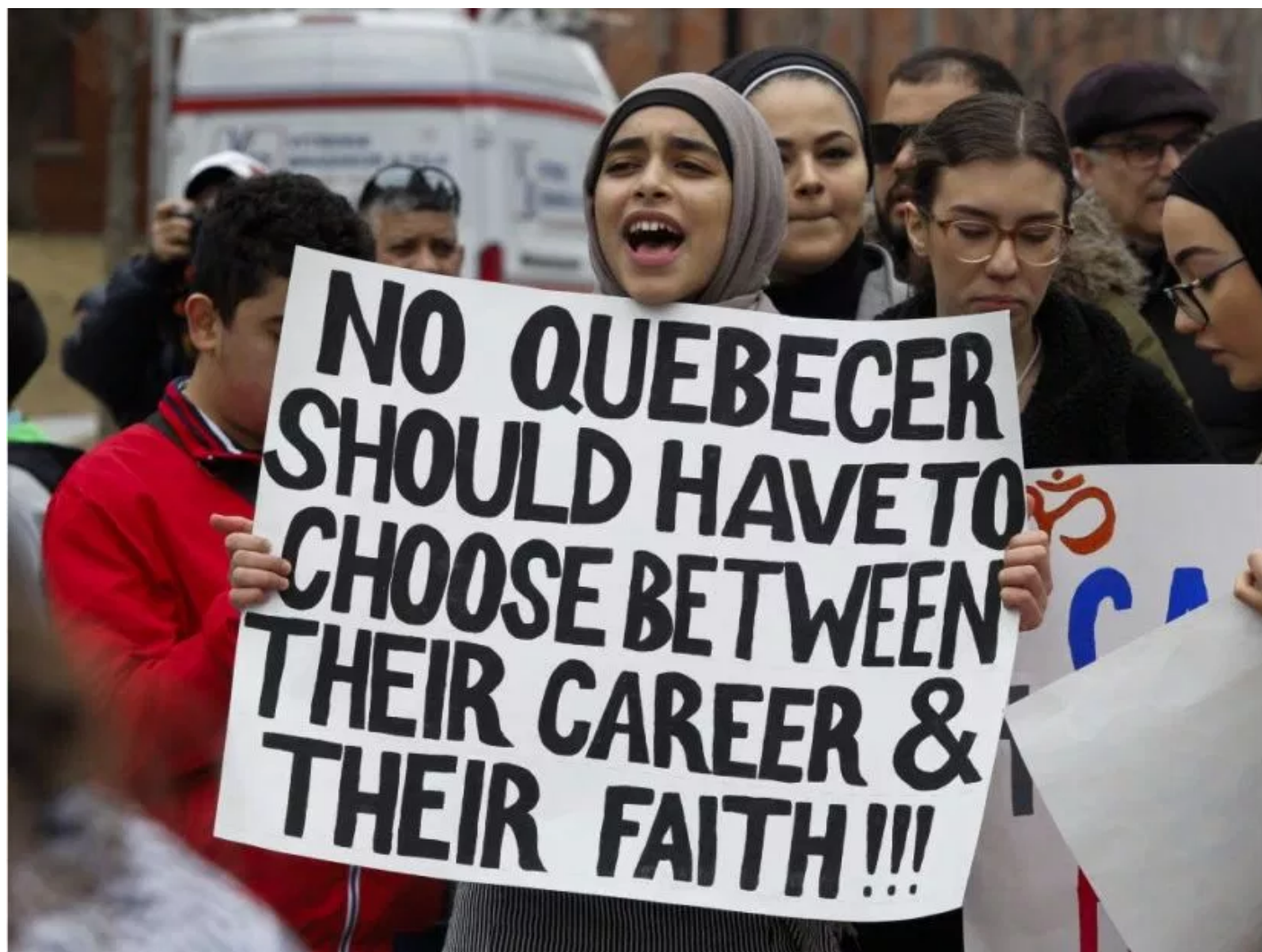


Martin Patriquin: Case of adult-ed teacher shows Bill 21's absurdities

Tracy Bounil works as a substitute teacher with the English Montreal School Board's adult education program. She also wears a hijab.

MARTIN PATRIQUIN, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/MARTIN-PATRIQUIN](https://montrealgazette.com/author/martin-patriquin))



A woman holds a sign in Montreal Sunday, April 7, 2019 at a demonstration to denounce the Quebec government's Bill 21. *JOHN KENNEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Last December, Tracy Bounil and her family left Calgary and moved to an apartment in Montreal's schmatte district, around Chabanel St. Doing so at

the outset of a Quebec winter might strike some as insane, but the motivation was decidedly prosaic: cheap rent, a healthy economy and the chance to instil bilingualism in their two young boys.

Within a month, she found work as a substitute teacher with the English Montreal School Board's adult education program, and a spot in subsidized daycare for her youngest. Her French is coming along — "It's better than my Arabic," she says — and her husband is studying to practise holistic medicine.

Yet by dint of several square feet of cloth, Bounil's Montreal dream may soon come to an end. An observant Muslim, Bounil wears a hijab, one of the many religious symbols prohibited under Bill 21, the Quebec government's proposed secularism law. Should it pass as expected, the law will essentially force Bounil and many other observant teachers to choose between their religion and their job.

"It's unfair, we're going back 50 years in terms of progress," she told me recently. "I'm usually a private person, I'm not used to talking. But this isn't for me. It's not just for Muslims. It's for anyone who wants religious freedom."

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Bounil's case highlights the absurdities, hypocrisies and casual cruelties baked into the government's proposed law, which would ban the wearing of religious symbols by public employees deemed to be in positions of authority, including primary and secondary school teachers.

First, an absurdity. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the EMSB's roughly 20,000 adult education students are ... adults. But because adult education institutions are considered high schools, Bounil would be forced to doff her

hijab — while her teacher colleagues in CEGEPs, where most first-year students are under 18, wouldn't have to do the same.

Next, some hypocrisy. The proposed law, which emphasizes the “importance to the equality of women and men,” would actually be inherently sexist. (<https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/opinion-bill-21-is-a-setback-for-womens-rights>) Bounil's hijab would preclude her from teaching in the elementary and high school systems. Yet a similarly observant Muslim man wearing a beard for religious reasons faces no similar prohibition. In fact, the proposed law is doubly sexist, as a religiously observant female teacher who can't teach necessarily becomes more reliant on her husband.

Finally, cruelty. This law will disproportionately and unfairly affect teachers more than anyone else in what the government calls “positions of authority” — at a time when the province is in the midst of an “unprecedented personnel shortage (<https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/fariha-naqvi-mohamed-how-about-focusing-on-quebecs-education-system>),” according to the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement, which represents more than 43,000 teachers in the province.

People like Bounil, armed with a teaching certificate and years of experience, are in demand. Yet they are often mobile as well. “I've lived overseas, South Korea, Algeria, Japan. I can move on, I can do this anywhere,” she says.

The EMSB announced that it wouldn't enforce the law should it come into effect — part of a growing coalition of dissidents, which includes the Lester B. Pearson School Board along with the association of 14 suburban municipalities. Admirable as this gesture is, however, Bounil says the government's targeting of religious freedom will have detrimental effects beyond the classroom.

She has a point. In 2013, the Parti Québécois government introduced not dissimilar legislation that would have cracked down on religious symbols in the public service. During the ensuing debate, which bears a striking likeness to the current one, L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, the province's association of women's centres, noticed an “increase in intolerance, violence and racism, particularly toward Muslim women who wear the veil.”

It's why Bounil will probably leave should Bill 21 become law. “There will be a serious discussion about what we are going to do, what put up with and what we don't,” she told me. “I don't want my kids to grow up in that sort

(<https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/allison-hanes-what-message-does-bill-21-send-our-children>)_of society.”

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