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Language law doomed: Marois 2

Shifts focus from 'watered-down' law to values charter

Premier Pauline Marois concedes the chances her minority government's new language legislation will ever get adopted by the National Assembly are very slim. Philip Authier reports that Marois raised the issue at a Parti Québécois caucus meeting and said opposition stonewalling is the reason Bill 14 is most likely going to die on the order paper. She added that while language is important, the demise of the bill appears likely because to "water it down" any more would make the law pointless. CARLETON-SUR-MER — The chances of Quebec's new language legislation, Bill 14, ever being adopted by the National Assembly are rather slim, Premier Pauline Marois conceded Thursday.



JUSTIN TANG/ THE GAZETTE

Premier Pauline Marois blames the Liberals for the Bill 14 language bust, citing their consistent stonewalling.

Her statement, which appears to represent a strategic retreat on the language issue for her government, came on the same day as the government reaffirmed controversial plans to draft a Quebec charter of values despite widespread criticism.

According to reports Thursday, the promised discussion paper outlining the scope of the charter will be made public by Democratic Institutions Minister Bernard Drainville on Sept. 9.

But while wrapping up a twoday pre-session meeting of the PQ caucus in Carleton-sur-Mer in Gaspésie, where the main theme was actually the economy, Marois was bombarded with questions on both issues.

She quickly blamed the Liberals for the language bust, citing their consistent stonewalling. There's little she can do, as leader of a minority government, and the bill is most likely destined to die on the order paper, Marois said.

She still has hopes last-ditch talks with the second opposition party, the Coalition Avenir Québec, will yield a compromise, but admitted things appear bleak.

To water down the bill any further to garner support from the other parties — something Marois is not willing to do — is to defeat the purpose of the exercise, which was designed to strengthen the Charter of the French Language, she said.

"Unfortunately, the law we presented was not adopted," Marois said. "There are still talks with the opposition, but, at this time, I don't think we can make more changes than the ones we proposed."

"We want to adopt this law, but, if it is not, we can't force things so it will die on the order paper."

The statement represents a significant flip-flop for the PQ, which campaigned on a promise to tighten up the charter but has had little success since taking power a year ago.

Language Minister Diane De Courcy, who was responsible for steering Bill 14 through the legislative process, investing weeks of public hearings and consultations, was not present when Marois made the statement.

Marois instead signalled the shift herself in outlining what she said will be the three pillars of her government's action this fall when the legislature resumes sitting Sept. 17.

One is job creation, the second is looking after Quebecers' needs and the third will be her government's proposed charter of Quebec values.

Language was not on the list, with Marois saying that although language is important for her government, "watering down" Bill 14 any more will make the law pointless.

But Bill 14 was in trouble from the get-go for many reasons.

With the exception of minority communities, which opposed it outright — dozens of those groups appeared before the National Assembly committee studying the bill — the legislation was largely ignored among francophones and did little to help the PQ's standings in the polls or the sovereigntist cause.

Language is a traditional war horse for the party, but the bill had been watered down too much in the minds of language hardliners.

Even before tabling it, the government dropped the extremely unpopular idea of applying the charter to the CEGEP system, an election promise.

It then ran into strong and emotional opposition to a clause that would strip from families of military personnel the right to send their children to English schools.

De Courcy proposed dropping that idea from Bill 14 and tacking it to a separate bill in the fall.

Municipalities also unanimously condemned a clause that would give the government the power to strip municipalities of bilingual status.

Fuelled by the Pastagate crisis that dogged De Courcy every day of the hearings, the business lobby ripped the clause in the bill that would have extended the charter to small businesses because it would create yet more red tape and costs.

As hearings into the bill neared the end, human rights organizations criticized plans to change the term "ethnic minorities" to cultural communities, as well as the idea of

inserting the right to live and work in French in the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The Liberals opposed the bill from the start and argued it had no merit, but the CAQ said it might support it if key clauses, such as the military one, were dropped.

By June, the bill was on life-support, except for the fact that the CAQ — based on promised amendments by De Courcy — voted in favour of second reading which, in theory, would mean the committee studying the bill could continue its work this fall.

It's now unclear whether that will happen or whether De Courcy will get to table amendments to the bill.

Marois, however, hinted the government will try to tighten up languages laws by steering through regulations that do not require the consent of the legislature.

"We'll act on the linguistic front where we can," Marois said.

But her reversal comes at a time when the PQ appears to have got a second wind with the debate over the proposed charter of Quebec values.

Marois insisted there is no connection between the two and said the values issue didn't just pop up today. She said the PQ, way back in 2008, presented a brief on the issue of reasonable accommodation to the Bouchard-Taylor commission.

Marois made the remarks at the end of a day that saw several PQ cabinet ministers trying to calm down anger about the proposed values charter, while at the same time defending it.

In the morning, ministers blasted Justin Trudeau for apparently drawing a parallel between Quebec's proposed charter of values and old segregation policies in the United States.

Marois said she wants the debate on the charter to take place in a calm and respectful climate.

"It's clear his (Trudeau's) statements do not incite calm, or serenity, and rather pour oil on the fire.

"If there is a government which has respected its minorities, which has respected people's freedom of religion, it's ours in Quebec and the government of the PQ in particular."

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