

Not even the Tea Party would consider something like Bill 60

BY CORIN CUMMINGS, THE GAZETTE JANUARY 31, 2014



Corin Cummings is a writer, IT consultant and stay-at-home dad in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce.

I am an American who has lived in Canada for 15 years, mostly in Toronto, but I've been in Montreal for the past three. As a member of Democrats Abroad during the George W. Bush era, I heard many expats complain about the anti-American atmosphere in Canada.

While I generally find Quebecers more empathetic toward Americans (although I don't know why), and I am deeply appreciative of how forgiving francophones are of my inability to speak to them when I sputter, "Désolé, je suis Américain," I sometimes find the politics here baffling.

Even as a cross-border political junkie, I frequently found myself during the last provincial election shaking my head and thinking of the PQ, "Even the craziest Republicans wouldn't say this kind of stuff."

Now there's Bill 60, the so-called values charter, and for the first time since I've lived in Canada I'm thinking, "Wow, that is so un-American!"

I don't think even the Tea Party would consider something like Bill 60.

Recently Quebec cabinet minister Bernard Drainville was quoted as saying, "For this (government) religious neutrality to be real, it has to be expressed through people. If the state is neutral, its agents must be neutral."

This strikes me as precisely backward. Government institutions should be secular and neutral so that individuals don't have to be. Assuming that a person is capable of doing his/her job, individuals are free to be who they want, whether it's based on religious belief or non-belief. Outward symbols need only be meaningful to the people wearing them. If the state is truly neutral, then these symbols are inert. Is it the role of government to protect the bigoted among us from shapes and pieces of cloth they don't like?

State institutions should treat everyone the same. Underlying this is the basic social contract: you protect my rights, and I'll protect yours. Most of us, after all, are minorities in one way or another. Nevertheless, here we have a situation where the PQ government wants to remove freedoms from its own employees, essentially making them second-class citizens.

If the PQ thinks that its own employees shouldn't have the right to certain kinds of basic freedom of expression, such as the outward expression of their religious/cultural beliefs, how can we believe it thinks anyone should have those rights? Or maybe the PQ thinks only certain people should have those rights.

There is one shred of common sense that I think the bill incorporates, but it need not be addressed in terms of religion. Simply put, it is inappropriate for individuals to cover their faces when dealing with the public in an official capacity. It doesn't matter if it's a burka or sunglasses or a hoodie. We live in a society of individual rights and responsibilities; people should clearly show their faces when interacting in the public realm.

Unfortunately, there is an obvious reason why the PQ chooses not to deal with this issue pragmatically. It's hard, in fact, to imagine that Bill 60 addresses a real problem at all. It looks to me like a red, white and blue herring. And like the American "culture wars" machinations it mimics, Bill 60 is purely and cynically political.

The idealess and incompetent are riling up voters in the hinterlands with an emotional and fear-inducing boogiemán.

In the red states south of the Canada-U.S. border, they're coming for your guns, and they're going to make you marry gays.

In Quebec, they're coming for your French, and they're going to make you wear turbans.