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IT'S MONTREAL, ICI ON PARLE EVERYTHING

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Joyful, jumbled language is a thing of beauty

Quebec's linguistic diversity is a thing of beauty that should be nurtured and not threatened. Peggy Curran responds to Diane De Courcy, Bonjour.

Hi. Je m'excuse. I'm sorry. That was so rude, daring to offer you the choice of service in the language in which you feel most comfortable. Trust me. It will happen again. This is Montreal. Ici on parle everything.

On Monday, Diane De Courcy, the minister responsible for Quebec's French-language charter, vowed to show us the error of our ways.

She insists there will be no more of that friendly linguistic nonsense in shops or businesses if the Parti Québécois wins a majority in the coming election.

In a blatant bid to curry favour in the province at the expense of Montreal, desolate political tundra for the PQ, the former head of the Commission scolaire de Montréal employed the intimidation tactics of a schoolyard bully.

Using and learning languages other than French is fine in the comfort of your own home, De Courcy said. (Hmm, that sounds familiar.) In the glorious future of a PQ majority government, that won't fly in institutions and businesses, no sir. Language laws will be stricter, and applied "without mercy."

At least until they become the target of international guffaws and homegrown jeers. Or prevent Quebec from landing a lucrative corporate deal.

De Courcy's proclamation coincided with a report compiled for BMO which says Montreal is struggling to keep pace with other large Canadian cities. We have the highest unemployment rate, the slowest growth.

Another study shows Montreal's airport lagging behind Toronto, Calgary or Vancouver. A third found just under 30 per cent of kindergarten children in Montreal's public schools are living in poverty.

Leave it to the PQ government to fixate instead on something that Montreal actually does better than most other cities on the planet and try to transform it into a negative that will resonate in the heartland.

In 2012, The Gazette put together a special series examining how Montrealers speak. Our focus on Frenglish rather than franglais was deliberate. The evolution of Montreal's language patterns and skills in recent decades, particularly among native English-speakers, has been nothing short of extraordinary.

Two out of three Montrealers are bilingual, and Montreal has the highest proportion of trilingual people of any city in North America. As often happens when people speak more than one tongue, dialects sometimes get jumbled up, joyfully, often in mid-sentence or conversation. It is a thing of beauty.

Not for De Courcy. Only a few months ago she was ordering the inspectors from the Office québécois de la langue française to stand down and "triage" complaints in an effort to avert another pastagate-style fiasco. Now there's an election in the wind.

La belle dame sans merci is serving extra helpings of "us and them" politics. That translates into scaremongering for Montreal, the promise of a common, francophone, sortof secular, pseudo-Christian, identity beyond the metropolis.

If this is any indication what to expect from the Quebec campaign, we're in for a very long 33 days.

There is a big difference between the rhetorical hogwash of the campaign trail and what happens when people get elected, with or without a majority. The PQ has been milking the charter of secular values since the last time it went shopping for votes 18 months ago. Bill 14, which was supposed to extend language restrictions to companies with 25 to 50 workers, died for lack of legislative enthusiasm last fall.

For all that Premier Pauline Marois muses about Quebec independence, so far the best she has to offer is yet another white paper and "collective reflection" during the next mandate.

Of course, we hope De Courcy's threat of stricter language laws is mere campaign posturing and pandering. But suppose it did become law. How long do you think it would take before a flustered OQLF boss had to back-pedal, trying to explain to the foreign press why someone got fined or fired for saying hello?

Meanwhile, debate over the secular charter has added new elements to Quebec's political landscape.

A CBC/EKOS poll this week found that over the last year, half of Quebec anglophones and allophones have toyed with the idea of leaving the province. Half. They cited reasons such as the economy, high taxes and political uncertainty. Wonder if there was a category for "just plain exhausted."

There's anxiety, yes, but also anger and rebelliousness.

For Montrealers who have no intention of leaving, be they anglophones, francophones or allophones, the charter has roused a defiant, non-compliance streak.

Spring is coming, and the bears are waking up.



So let's hear it once more, with feeling — and attitude. Bonjour. Hi. Hola. Buongiorno. Them's fighting words.

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