

A question of belonging: What place does Bill 96 leave for anglos?

WEEKEND READ | Quebec's overhaul of the French language charter fills leaders in the English community with "anxiety and worry about where this is all going."

Marian Scott • Montreal Gazette

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Bill 96 is nearing adoption at a time when research shows numerous challenges facing English-speakers in Quebec. "Not only are English-speakers doing relatively less well, at the same time we're contending with myths that we're doing better," says Lorraine O'Donnell, a research associate at the Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network at Concordia University. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

If there were a worry-o-metre for Quebec’s English-speaking community, it would be peaking right now, as the government gets ready to adopt Bill 96, overhauling the province’s French language charter.



“My sense is that there is a lot of concern, a lot of anxiety,” said Celine Cooper, a political analyst and former Montreal Gazette columnist who is currently director-general of the Consortium of English-language CEGEPs, Colleges and Universities of Quebec.

“There is real concern and anxiety and worry about where this is all going,” said Cooper, who has two children, of whom one is nearing CEGEP age.

“This is the first time, really, where we are in deep reflection around what these changes in Bill 96 could mean for our family, for our kids’ sense of belonging to Quebec,” she said.

The last time language tensions reached this pitch, she noted, was nearly a decade ago, when former premier Pauline Marois introduced but later withdrew Bill 14, a previous update of Bill 101.

In the current context, the concerns no longer revolve around sovereignty, as in past decades, she said.

“That isn’t it now. It’s about who really belongs, who’s going to be given priority in terms of success,” Cooper said.

“I think the kinds of messages that are coming out, the sense of division, are more pronounced now than we’ve seen in quite some time,” she said.

Forty-five years after the adoption of [Bill 101](#), English-speakers in Quebec are a very different community. On the one hand, they are far more bilingual and attuned to the francophone mainstream. On the other, they now lag behind francophones for median income and face higher unemployment.

Yet critics say the language bill seems to be targeting the English-speaking community of decades past, when it was seen as a privileged minority with low rates of bilingualism.

“In my view, what has gotten under the skin of so many anglos this time around is the absolutely bizarre, disconnected attack on the anglophone community, based on a perception from 50 years ago,” said former politician and current Montreal Gazette columnist Tom Mulcair.

“The people who have stayed here, they live and can work in French. Their kids don’t just go to immersion but very often are in French school. They’ve made a conscious choice to stay here and to contribute to Quebec society,” said Mulcair, a past leader of the federal NDP and provincial Liberal cabinet minister.

“To hear fake information — the lack of French among the CEGEP students, for example — is galling, it’s insulting, it’s annoying,” he said.

Last week, hundreds of students [demonstrated against Bill 96](#) at English-language CEGEPs across Quebec.

On Saturday at 10 a.m., hundreds more are expected to [rally against Bill 96](#) at Dawson College before marching to Premier François Legault’s office.



A rally against Bill 96 at Dawson College on May 5, 2022. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

At issue are provisions capping enrolment in English-language CEGEPs at 17.5 per cent of the overall student population — freezing it at last school year’s level.

Under recent amendments to the bill, francophones and allophones attending English CEGEPs would be required to take three of their core courses in French in addition to two existing French-language instruction course requirements. And they would have to pass a French proficiency exam to graduate, the same one passed by students graduating from French CEGEPs.

Anglophone students, meanwhile, would have the option of taking three core courses in French or three French-language instruction courses, plus the two French-language courses already required.

In January, the government axed a long-planned expansion of Dawson College, saying it had chosen to prioritize francophone students.

This week, Simon Jolin-Barrette, the minister responsible for the bill, slammed the door on a request by

First Nations to be exempted from it.

The business community has also mobilized against the bill, saying it will unfairly burden companies and harm the economy.

It would make small businesses with between 25 and 50 employees subject to the charter's francization requirements.

Employers would be required to take "reasonable measures" to avoid requiring employees to know any language but French — a measure that the business community fears could hurt companies that export products.

"Quebec companies have to be able to hire bilingual employees and offer services in English to clients outside Quebec," Michel Leblanc, president of the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal, said this week.

The massive language bill, which retired senator and former La Presse editor-in-chief André Pratte has blasted as "Bill 101 on steroids," also curtails access to English services in health care and the courts. It grants the Office québécois de la langue française broad powers of search and seizure — a facet Mulcair termed "an abomination in any free and democratic society."

It is nearing adoption at a time when research shows English-speakers across Quebec face significant hurdles to employment, said Lorraine O'Donnell, a research associate at the Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN) at Concordia University.

"That's very problematic," O'Donnell said.

"That means that anglophones are not necessarily thriving in comparison to the francophone majority."

The bill also reinforces "some very stubborn clichés about English-speakers as being a privileged, dominant elite," she said.

"So not only are English-speakers doing relatively less well, at the same time we're contending with myths that we're doing better," O'Donnell added.



“We feel like Bill 96 focuses on the punitive and coercive measures and the opportunity to bring in the English-speaking community as part of the project, to figure out how to protect French and work together, was missed,” says Nicholas Salter, executive director of the Provincial Employment Roundtable. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Out-migration also continues to affect the community, she said.

“The rough tendency is that the more educated an English-speaker is, the more likelihood that they will leave the province,” she said.

“It means natural caregivers for the older generation are leaving. It means educated people who might, in another circumstance, lead the community, are leaving,” she added.

English-speakers account for about 10 per cent of the population, yet hold only one per cent of jobs in the provincial civil service, she noted.

Unemployment among anglophones is at least two per centage points higher than among francophones, said Nicholas Salter, executive director of the Provincial Employment Roundtable (PERT), a non-profit

initiative focused on employment challenges facing the province's English-speaking community.

They also trail francophones for median income by \$2,800, he noted.

"When it comes to Bill 96, we're worried that in the absence of significant skill-training and other kinds of programs, the bill will exacerbate the existing kind of trends we see in employment for English-speakers," he said.

"English-speakers are increasingly being squeezed from the labour market," he added.

Despite a 69-per-cent bilingualism rate among anglophones, according to the 2016 census, research shows two-thirds of anglos in the job market view French as a barrier to hiring and advancement, Salter said.

Among English-speaking children and teens age five to 17, bilingualism reached 87 per cent.

"There's some complexity around the fact that there are higher levels of bilingualism than there used to be and yet there's still concerns in the CEGEPs that the students might not have a French level they need to have access to the French-language job market," O'Donnell said.

"If we don't have enough of the right kind of French to be job-ready, then we need training," she said.

Researchers agree there's a need to delve further into anglophones' second-language skills, since current studies rely on self-reported census results.

"We feel like Bill 96 focuses on the punitive and coercive measures," Salter said.

"The opportunity to bring in the English-speaking community as part of the project, to figure out how to protect French and work together, was missed," he added.



“This is the first time, really, where we are in deep reflection around what these changes around Bill 96 could mean for our family, for our kids’ sense of belonging to Quebec,” says Celine Cooper, a political analyst and director-general of the Consortium of English-Language CEGEPs, Colleges and Universities of Quebec. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

While new immigrants have access to intensive French classes, that is still not the case for people born here, he noted.

French-language training programs in the workplace are insufficient and hard to find, Salter said.

O’Donnell said the bill could have been an opportunity to work collaboratively and share findings on the English-speaking community.

“My concern is that I’m not always sure that all the decisions are made with careful consultation of English-speaking communities and careful consideration of the research,” she said.

“I would say collectively, there’s a disappointment that there isn’t enough asking on the part of government deciders for that dialogue,” she added.

Bill 96 is “a very polarizing way of addressing the issues,” said Jack Jedwab, president of the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS).

“Politically, this is really damaging to the English-speaking community,” he said.

Anglophones and francophones are sharply divided on Bill 96 and on the perceived threat to French that underpins it, according to a Léger survey in May 2021 for the ACS and Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN).

Three-quarters of English-speakers say the bill will worsen relations between the two language groups, compared to only 36 per cent of francophones.

Cooper lamented that the debate has eroded consensus on the language issue.

“I think most English-speakers in Montreal would acknowledge the importance of validating French, of celebrating French, of encouraging people to speak French because this is one of the richnesses of living in Quebec and in Montreal,” she said.

“Instead of continually creating these kind of doomsday scenarios, and in so doing targeting certain population groups as the problem or as a threat or a danger, I think that there has to be a way to focus on a celebration of the richness of the French language and taking an encouraging approach,” she added.

AT A GLANCE:

The rally against Bill 96 will start Saturday at 10 a.m. at Dawson College, 3040 Sherbrooke St. W. Satirical duo Bowser and Blue will perform and speakers will include Robert Leckey, dean of law at McGill University. Participants will then march to Premier François Legault’s office at the corner of Sherbrooke St. W. and McGill College Ave. The event will end about noon.

Organizers include the Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN), English Parents’ Committee Association (EPCA), Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations (QFHSA) and the Quebec English School Boards Association (QESBA).

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