

OPINION

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Holding Onto Language by Political Force is a Recipe for Failure

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ewed from Old Town on June 30, 2015 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. George Rose/Getty Images

If people living in the United States are appalled by how their state manages their laws and policies, they should be grateful that they do not live in the province of Quebec, the only province in Canada that is majority French-speaking.

The [majority of Quebecois are French speakers](#). Yet, [almost 20% of the population speak English at home](#). Most significantly, this percentage is growing.

[English is the language to learn](#) around the world. Much of this is driven by the desire to [immigrate to countries with English as their primary language](#), including the United States, which offers numerous opportunities.

The policies set forward in Quebec surrounding language all appear to be [rooted in fear](#). Indeed, the primary issue that drives Quebec politics is linguistic protectionism, namely setting laws and policies that are designed to keep people (particularly immigrants) speaking French and suppressing the growth of the English language.

It is appalling how Quebec politicians continue to mandate and impose antiquated and misguided ideals on the province's population. The two most recent egregious perpetrators, in my view, are [Bill 96](#) and the [doubling of tuition for out-of-province students](#) that impact English institutions of higher education located in Quebec, like [McGill](#) and [Concordia](#).

[Bill 96](#) enforces French as the language of business in the province. Described as an [update to Bill 101, passed in 1977](#), Bill 96 provides detailed guidelines on how French should be integrated as the language of commerce. Such micromanagement is the antithesis of a free-market system.

Any company that wishes to stay in business must fill their customers' needs, either with products or services offered. If your customer base are French speakers, then business drives the need to provide products and services in their language of choice. No law is needed to enforce such a fundamental economic concept.

By imposing a law that not only prescribes the level of French in business operations, but also provides [penalties and legal avenues of recourse against alleged infractions](#), government is inserting itself in a place that no sound business should tolerate.

What are the risks of such an egregious law?

Any company wishing to expand into the province will need to weigh the benefits of such a move against the additional cost of such operations. This creates unnecessary economic obstacles that are guaranteed to deter some companies from making such moves, or perhaps even relocating out of the province. The net effect of this is fewer economic opportunities for Quebecers.

To put this into perspective, suppose that the states of California, Texas, New Mexico, Florida, Nevada or Arizona — [with the highest proportion of Spanish speakers](#) — required that the language of businesses in their borders must be English only. This means that any enterprises owned by Spanish speakers must, by law, be operated in English. Such businesses, if they wish to attract English-speaking patrons, will certainly provide such accommodations. This is just sound business practice. However, to mandate English into such establishments in places where many customers are Spanish speakers is foolish, and, most importantly, unnecessary.

Bill 96 is nothing more than a form of protectionism. It can even be classified as a form of affirmative action, by giving preferential treatment to those who operate in French. It is certainly discriminatory against businesses that are owned by English speakers and whose primary business base also speaks English.

This is not the first law passed in Quebec that makes no sense.

[Bill 21](#), passed back in 2019, forbids religious symbols from being worn by people of various denominations when working in positions of authority or public service — including hijabs, turbans and crucifixes. To describe such a law as anything but [discriminatory](#) would be an understatement.

The recent policy that doubles tuition for out-of-province students is even more protectionism. It deters out-of-province students, the majority of whom will attend English institutions, from coming into the province, effectively opting for the [University of Toronto](#) and the [University of British Columbia](#) over McGill.

I see these laws and policies as a form of “[linguistic genocide](#)” — [and I’m not alone](#) — given the policies create an environment designed to suppress all other languages within the province.

What these misguided politicians have not figured out is that their actions are unlikely to work. Yes, many French speakers will stay in the province, and fewer English will enter or remain. Yet, the big loser is the province and all its people because of the opportunities that are turned away and lost.

Montreal is a wonderful city, as is Quebec City. Yet, it appears this toxic protectionist approach to language politics is symptomatic of wounded and fearful leadership. Installing a [French language minister](#) is evidence of such dysfunction.

Around [380 million people live in North America](#), with the vast majority being English speakers. French is not even the second most used language on the continent ([Spanish takes that prize](#)). Holding onto a language by political force is antiquated and destructive. Most significantly, it is unnecessary, taking away the freedoms that every person deserves.

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