



Pierre Karl Péladeau's fist pump and call "to make Quebec a country", with Pauline Marois leading the applause. The defining moment and indelible image of the Quebec campaign. *Montreal Gazette* photo

# The Politics of Identity, or How the PQ Lost Its Soul

Bernard St-Laurent

*Pundits and campaign gurus will spend years reliving the narrative of the spectacularly flawed campaign run by outgoing Parti Québécois Leader Pauline Marois. What on earth were they thinking? One of the province's most experienced political observers argues that the PQ didn't just gamble away its minority mandate on a flawed strategy, it allowed the ghost of a previous election to skew its thinking on the value of identity politics.*

On Monday, March 31, seven days before the provincial election, Premier Pauline Marois surprised everyone.

At her morning meeting with the media, standing in front of her candidates from the Mauricie region, Marois announced she was prepared to invoke the notwithstanding clause of the Constitution to shelter Bill 60, the so-called charter of secular values, from court challenges.

It was surprising because the government had claimed for months that confidential justice department legal opinions indicated Bill 60 would survive a court challenge.

The Quebec Human Rights Commission and the Quebec Bar Association, among others, argued the opposite. In their view, preventing public sector workers from wearing overt religious symbols was a clear violation of human rights and would almost certainly be declared invalid.

Even former Supreme Court justice Claire

L'Heureux Dubé, a supporter of the charter of values, had encouraged the government to protect Bill 60 by invoking the notwithstanding clause. Bernard Drainville, the minister responsible for the charter, simply dismissed the warnings.

So why the sudden turnaround? On the same day Marois affirmed her willingness to protect the charter by invoking the notwithstanding clause, *La Presse* columnist Vincent Marissal exposed the master strategy behind the PQ's "virage identitaire." Marissal explained how a trio of sovereignist intellectuals convinced Marois to take the party down the tortuous road of identity politics in a way it had never gone before.

The plan was to adopt the charter without a notwithstanding clause, with the expectation of a court challenge and a likely ruling of unconstitutionality.

The belief was that a rejection of the *Charte de la laïcité*, based on a constitution Quebec never signed, would stir enough negative sentiment to launch the third referendum campaign. In making the announcement, Marois denied the allegation that she was looking for a fight.

By the last week of the campaign, the charter strategy was already in big trouble. During the televised debates, the opposition party leaders made the case that 90 per cent of the charter could have been adopted unanimously, including provisions affirming the neutrality of the state, asserting the equality of men and women and setting out the guidelines to deal with requests for religious accommodations.

They accused Marois of choosing to exploit the more divisive articles to heighten social tension rather than seeking consensus. The day before, Janette Bertrand, an 89-year-old Quebec media icon, claimed the charter was needed to prevent rich Muslim McGill students from taking over the swimming pool at her private condo in downtown Montreal. Bertrand had lent her name to a movement of Quebec women brought together by media personality Julie Snyder, Pierre Karl Péladeau's ex-partner. No one, not the premier, not Drainville, nor any of the other PQ candidates attending the event at which Bertrand told the story, said anything about the absurd scenario. Within hours,

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columnists around the province deplored the embarrassing incident. Later that week Marois also conceded that people in public service who refused to remove their religious symbols would indeed lose their jobs.

**S**o how could the PQ have gotten it so wrong? In 2007, the PQ finished third behind the Liberals of Jean Charest and the Action Démocratique du Québec led by Mario Dumont.

During the entire campaign, the ADQ had stirred questions around religious accommodations and the loss of Quebec identity. This was the beginning of the notion of unreasonable accommodations, which eventually led to the Bouchard-Taylor Commission on accommodation practices related to cultural differences. The 2007 loss was a devastating blow to the PQ. To this day, many Péquistes believe they lost the election because Dumont and the ADQ outflanked them on identity issues.

All of this made it easier for some, like sociologist Jacques Beauchemin (whom Marois later named associate deputy minister responsible for language), to continue pushing for a greater focus on ethnic nationalism.

Marois bought into those arguments.

In the 2012 election, she promised to toughen up Quebec's language laws, introduce a charter of secularism, adopt a Quebec constitution and introduce the teaching of a National Quebec History. And yet the first warning signal that identity politics might not be the answer for the PQ came in the results of that very election. After nine years of Liberal government, amid constant talk of collusion and corruption within Liberal ranks, the PQ received less than one per cent more of the popular vote than the Liberals (31.95 per cent to 31.20 per cent).

**W**ithin a few months of forming a minority government, the PQ set in motion the identity debate by leaking a poll to the *Journal de Montreal* show-

ing that Quebecers opposed unreasonable religious accommodations.

Months and months of nasty debate ensued. Polls showed that a majority of Quebecers supported the charter of values. But when time came to vote, only eight per cent of voters said it was a priority issue for them. The overwhelming majority of those who were in favour of Bill 60 didn't feel strongly enough about it to let the issue drive their vote. It was a very different story for those who were opposed to it.

Meanwhile, Philippe Couillard was able to assemble an impressive team of newcomers to the Liberal Party. They included Economists Carlos Laitao and Martin Coiteux, investment banker Jacques Daoust, Hélène David, the vice rector at the Université de Montréal and the sister of Quebec Solidaire leader Françoise David, as well as François Blais, the former dean of the faculty of social sciences at Laval University in Quebec city. They all said opposing the charter was one of the essential reasons behind their decision to get involved in active politics. *Maclean's* reported the charter was also the driving force that led former Premier Daniel Johnson Jr. to play an active role in the Liberal campaign and eventually oversee Couillard's transition team after the election.

So, at the end of the 2014 election the PQ finds itself reeling from its worst electoral performance since 1970. The Liberals have increased their popular support by 400,000 votes. Young francophone Quebecers have rejected the politics of division. For the PQ, hopes of gaining support outside of its ever-aging francophone base have been shattered.

Quebecers now have four years to mend relations with each other. And the PQ, the party of René Lévesque, has four years to find its lost soul. **P**

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