

'The Gradual Civic Suicide of a Society of Rights'

Threats to civil liberties in Canada have the unusual characteristic of a right denied to the population by the indifference and insipidity of the population itself.



by Conrad Black

The most serious current civil rights challenge in Canada is the Quebec language legislation that has steadily imposed limitations on all languages in Quebec except French. The government of Robert Bourassa in 1974 declared that French was the only official language in Quebec and required that in all signage within commercial establishments, such as supermarkets, the lettering in French had to be larger than in

any other language.

Access to English-language instruction was in many cases to be allowed only when preschool children passed tests indicating a greater aptitude to speak English than French. This last measure caused great resentment, and the concept arose of "language police" and was much mocked. There were many accounts of tourists, particularly Americans, asking that the "language police" be identified, and they were often disappointed that they did not have striking uniforms like red-coated Mounties.

In 1977, Quebec's first overtly separatist government, led by Premier René Lévesque, further restricted the use of English and access to English-language education in the public school system. Hundreds of thousands of English-speaking people have departed Quebec since the adoption of Bourassa's Bill 22 in 1974, but the secularization of Quebec and a declining birth rate have reduced French Quebec's share of the Canadian population.

This has been somewhat compensated for by French-speaking immigrants from Haiti, North Africa and Lebanon. These people tend to be not much interested in Quebec nationalism and knew they were moving to a mainly English-speaking continent. The provincial government does not currently speak much of separating, but is still pushing its aggressive language agenda.

The latest measure in this sequence is Bill 96, which recently became law. It will shrink the number of people attending English-language schools and discriminates against the use of English in Quebec offices and workplaces of the federal government and federally chartered corporations and institutions. This is unconstitutional, and it is shameful that all five federal political parties have rolled over like poodles and not uttered a peep of objection.

It follows in the spirit of Quebec legislation prohibiting the wearing of religious objects or religious apparel that makes it impossible to identify a Muslim woman in public. This measure is arguably justified by a public security requirement that everyone be capable of being identified in public, but it also appeases a particular irritation in Quebec over Islamic symbolism.

It also seems related to a subtler and more historically profound sentiment of Quebec's resentment of the centuries when it was very heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. Nationalist French Quebec's antipathy to the organization that secured the cultural survival of the French language for 175 years undoubtedly reveals profound psychological complexities in Quebec. In these circumstances, both language and religious liberties are under some threat in Quebec.

What we might call an administrative and political intrusion on fundamental rights is becoming steadily more annoying and worrisome, and not only in Quebec. My learned friend Jordan Peterson retired from the University of Toronto because our institutes of higher learning are now set up to discriminate on the basis of race and gender.

The truckers this past winter had legitimate grievances against the Covid regime and were largely engaged in peaceful protest. Yet they were suppressed under the Emergencies Act on the theory that they were creating a public order emergency. An attempt by some truckers to block traffic at border points was stopped by normal police action.

Parking trucks in downtown Ottawa does not constitute a public order emergency and could have been alleviated without recourse to draconian legislation. Our effective co-prime minister, the New Democratic Party Leader, Jagmeet Singh, declared: "It is clear that this is not a protest; this is an act to try to overthrow the government, and it is getting

funded by foreign interference and we need to investigate and stop that – stop the flow of that foreign interference, particularly coming from the (United) States.”

He also declared that the convoy was being “led by those that claim the superiority of the white bloodline and equate Islam to a disease.” Prime Minister Trudeau, when the truckers were still hundreds of miles away, implied that they were all homophobes, misogynists, and white supremacists. All of these reflections from the highest elected officials in the country were disgraceful, defamatory, unfounded lies.

In the name of climate change, economic warfare is conducted against the oil and gas-producing regions of the country and that entire economic sector. Higher energy costs and lower income for the fossil fuel industry are not acceptable consequences of legitimate public policy positions; they are infringements upon the civil and economic rights of citizens and businesses.

Our health-care system, of which Canadians remain inexplicably proud, is arbitrarily rationing health care and is stunted by an inadequate number of doctors, much of it due to the persecution of private medicine. And our health-care systems are now reduced to the shame and indignity of promoting assisted suicide as death with dignity, which, incidentally, if widely enough practised, would bring down health-care costs along with life expectancy. Health-care systems are supposed to promote life, not death.

Perhaps the greatest irony of recent public policy in Canada, and in all other advanced western countries, is that we spend more and more on education and yet have less and less well-educated graduates at almost every level. It is clear from the irresponsible behavior of our teachers’ unions, repeatedly blackmailing parents with strike-threats, that they have little interest in the welfare of their students. They are effectively running daycare centers with a sprinkling of

rudimentary academic instruction.

Our university system tyrannizes anyone who is not a proponent of the mass fiction that we live in a racist and inadequately Marxist society. We are impoverishing ourselves by graduating an immense horde of university students in fields that cannot possibly provide them with an adequate living. Our universities are dumbed-down infestations of under-challenged students, under-worked and often subversive faculty imparting expertise in esoteric subjects. Mr. Peterson is correct when he says that no subject ending in the word "studies" has any academic standing.

Where the schools are in the hands of the robotic left and focused largely on the study of irrelevant disciplines, we are certain to get, as we have, a steadily less responsible and reliable press. As objective tests of our secondary school graduates reveal steadily lower standards of achievement, public opinion polling also indicates that a steadily smaller percentage of the public trusts the media.

These contemporary threats to civil rights have the unusual characteristic of a civil right denied to the population by the indifference and insipidity of the population itself. The public is right to distrust some media outlets, but that breeds indifference to a free press, which is essential to democracy. What we are witnessing, if it continues, is the gradual civic suicide of a society of rights. This can be reversed, but we had better start now.

First published in the [National Post](#). This column is excerpted from an address given on behalf of the Democracy Fund on June 21.