

Bill 21 wrong for Canada

In the absence of federal government action, municipalities standing up to Quebec law

BY JASON VELTRI

AS CHAIR of the City of Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism & Respect Advisory Committee, I believe that racism in all forms, both locally and nationally, must be a focus of our work. And, that's why it is pertinent to discuss Quebec's Bill 21.

What is Bill 21? Bill 21 is legislation that bans the wearing and displaying of religious symbols such as hijabs, kippas, turbans and crosses by teachers and other public service employees deemed to be in positions of authority. The Quebec government passed the bill in June of 2019. Most recently, the bill was used to fire a Grade 3 teacher in Chelsea, Que., for wearing her hijab to work.

The premise of the bill is rooted in discrimination and built on colonial racism. This not only is a fundamental attack on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms but it's an attack on diverse cultures like Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and other often-marginalized backgrounds in Canada.

Under Section 2a of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canadians are free to follow the religion of their choice and are guaranteed freedom of thought, belief and expression of such religious beliefs.

The attack on our charter affects all of us; it worsens social attitudes and prejudice towards Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus along with other religions and religious symbols in Quebec and Canada. Most recently, efforts have been made to fight back against this



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The Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

very dangerous legislation in Quebec. The efforts have been lead by Patrick Brown, the mayor of Brampton, Ont., and other members of Ontario's Big City Mayors, which has enlisted Canadian municipalities to step up to call for a court challenge of Bill 21 in the Supreme Court of Canada in the absence of federal government action. It is the federal government's role to ensure the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is upheld.

At the Jan. 17 meeting of the Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee, I proposed a motion to ask the Thunder Bay City Council to publicly oppose Quebec's Bill 21. The motion asked city council to show leadership by endorsing the initiative lead by Mayor Brown and Ontario's Big City Mayors that asks the Canadian Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities to create a nationwide campaign that highlights the harmful and widespread impacts

of Bill 21 on social cohesion and inclusion in Canada.

It was recommended that the City of Thunder Bay send a letter to the federal government requesting they unequivocally condemn and challenge Bill 21. On Feb. 14, Thunder Bay City Council showed leadership by unanimously passing this recommendation from the Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee.

Moving forward, I strongly believe that it is everyone's responsibility to open their minds and hearts to the divisiveness of policies like this. We need to renew our focus on building inclusive, welcoming and vibrantly diverse and multicultural communities because that is what makes Canada one of the most desirable and highly ranked countries to live and visit.

The troublesome and dangerous precedent that Quebec's Bill 21 has set could bleed into the fabric of our society and leave lasting damage to our nation, communities and to what makes Canada, Canada. It is my belief that people should not be forced to make the choice between their religion, their identity and their profession.

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