

Of all Canada's political party leaders, Pauline Marois may well be Canada's clumsiest communicator. Almost every pronouncement she makes about language and Quebec culture — little else seems to preoccupy her — draws both internal and external critical fire.

It's hard to know what motivates Marois's proposed projects, such as the now floundering Bill 14, which would further constrict Bill 101's already severe French-language protections that it became an international scandal. Is it racism, or a Macchiavellian strategy to whip up anti-Quebec sentiment, which could raise ethnic wagon-circling to "winning conditions" referendum fervour?

Indeed criticism from those in the rest of Canada or from federalist Quebecers may be to Marois what the death penalty is to jihadists: a reward for their martyrdom to a sacred cause. The more opprobrium she receives from outsiders, the more sympathetic she is to "family."

If opprobrium is what Marois wants, she is getting it in spades — internally and externally — for her latest caper, her government's proposed Charter of Quebec Values. The Charter would reportedly ban anyone in public service from wearing religious symbols like turbans, hijabs, kippas or ostentatious religious jewellery. To many observers, this project confirms what they have always suspected: that Marois is a blatant racist.

Quebec Liberal leader Philippe Couillard called such a potential ban "unreasonable." That was kind compared to denunciations from outside the province from pundits and politicians alike. On Sunday, Calgary's Mayor Naheed Nenshi said the proposed text was a "violation" of Canadian ethics, and invited any Quebecers committed to religiously significant garb to come on down to Calgary, where "diversity" is celebrated.

Ontario Liberal leader Kathleen Wynne weighed in as well, expanding on "diversity" and "inclusiveness" as sources of strength for Ontario. Ontario Citizenship and Immigration Minister Michael Coteau had previously boasted that "Ontario's diversity and freedom of expression and religion is a model to the world."

I must confess — I realize what follows will earn me the multiculturalism Party Pooper of the Year award — that if I hear words "diversity" and "inclusiveness" one more time from a misty-eyed politician, I may have to take a Gravel and apply a cold cloth to my forehead. Even worse, I find myself tempted to defend Mme Marois, a politician for whom I have very little respect, and whose government I hope will soon fall.

I don't know whether Marois is a racist. I do know that multiculturalism presents problems that many other politicians are too politically correct to address. Diversity and inclusiveness are abstract terms. Regular prayer sessions in schools, in which girls sit at the back and are excluded when they are menstruating, is a fact. Kitschy endorsements of diversity and inclusiveness are not useful in dealing with such situations.

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As has been pointed out by other observers, Quebec's intellectuals and influence-makers take their philosophical positions about society more from collectivist European models than from the British tradition of privileging individual rights. France, a country to which many Quebec intellectuals look for inspiration, has in recent years taken a very tough-love approach to multiculturalism. They banned the hijab in schools years ago and ban the niqab now. Is France a racist society? Or simply a society whose cultural tradition confers greater social value in a uniform public identity than in identifiable cultural silos that fragment an atmosphere of civic unity?

Make no mistake. The proposed Quebec Charter of Secular Values is not about kippas, pendant crosses or hijabs. It is, in my opinion, about the niqab. Two years ago, to my regret, Bill 94, a bill proposed by the provincial Liberals that would have banned face cover in the giving and getting of public service, died in gestation.

The Quebec government then, and now, made it clear that while diversity and inclusiveness are fine ideals, there are limits to what any society based in democratic principles can tolerate. There are red lines that cannot be crossed in the name of diversity. Face cover is one of them, so I think all this talk of other accessories is just camouflage for the real target.

So yes, the proposed Charter goes way too far. Yes, the optics are terrible and portray this government as unfriendly to those not of the heritage culture. Yes, yes, yes to all that. But in spite of all the things that are wrong with the Charter, the fears that are driving it are neither evil nor even unrealistic. What is unrealistic is to assume that dancing the diversity-and-inclusiveness polka is the answer to multiculturalism's inherent risks.

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