

Barbara Kay: Quebec's niqab ban is progressive. The NDP apparently isn't

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In their Sunday night French-language debate in Montreal, four NDP leadership aspirants gingerly navigated the minefield of Quebec's Bill 62, [nearing enactment](#), which will ban face coverings in the delivery and reception of publicly-funded services.

As good leftists one and all, Charlie Angus, Guy Caron, Jagmeet Singh and Niki Ashton oppose any such ban in their multicultural hearts, but desperately want to avoid offending Quebec nationalists (and others, such as this columnist) who find such a ban perfectly reasonable.

My colleague Chris Selley came down particularly hard on Niki Ashton in his recent [commentary](#) in these pages, for her ascription of Quebec's antipathy to the niqab to the "widely different ... place" religion has held in Quebec "since the Quiet Revolution." Selley was having none of this "standard defence"—i.e. that it is more about Quebec's political history than Islam per se—a position he labels "hopelessly transparent rubbish." He then sarcastically elaborated on how "very odd" it seemed to him that only Islam was targeted in the ban, since "Bill 62 places no restrictions on providing or receiving public services while wearing any religious garment or symbol other than the niqab."

It isn't the least bit odd. Bill 62 is essentially a revival of Bill 94, a face-cover ban proposal tabled in 2010, but killed in a Liberals election defeat. It therefore predates the PQ's infamous 2013 "Charter of Values," targeting all religious symbols, which Quebecers rejected as intolerant, and so it was.

So while Selley's criticism of Ashton for soft-peddling her opposition to Bill 62 for political gain was warranted, his follow-on conflation of Islamophobia with Bill 62 is unfair.

The fact that the niqab is an Islamic custom is correlational, not causal to Bill 62's motivation. The ban springs from a revulsion with how face covers interfere with social reciprocity in the public forum. It is not the fault of the Quebec government that only Muslim women wear the niqab. And if Islam were the target, why would Bill 62 give the hijab—well tolerated in Quebec—a pass?

The niqab is as *sui generis* to public life as public nakedness. In a [previous column](#) on this issue, I observed that we "do not permit public nakedness because we are not animals. We should not permit full cover because we are not things." To pretend that the niqab is merely a "modesty" variant of the hijab or the kippah is a risible distortion of what is, well, as plain as the nose on most of our faces.

That expression "plain as the nose on your face," is a metaphor for common sense. "Reading" each other's faces is a primal social need. It is no coincidence that the niqab is the common female uniform only in societies where women are generally viewed as chattel. Face covers on women triggers associations—perfectly legitimately in any democratic society—of women living under oppression. To be forced by political correctness to pretend a face mask is a morally neutral accessory in public self-presentation is psychologically stressful and offensive to free people.

No other modesty symbol so violates the implied social contact that allows for mutual trust in state-sponsored transactions. We have no choice in whom we deal with in the public service—and vice versa. Bill 62 recognizes that it is unfair to force citizens or public servants to negotiate obligatory civic terrain with faceless interlocutors.

Quebec need feel no shame in passing this long-anticipated and principled bill into law. Bill 62 will create a level playing field for optimal social integration of those women who yearn to become fully Canadian, but haven't the power within their kinship circles to unmask on their own authority. Bill 62 will be a liberation for them. For those women who are unwilling to unmask—well, they won't get jobs in the public sector, but Bill 62 makes it more likely that their daughters will not perpetuate this gender-retrograde custom. An acceptable tradeoff, I think.

NDP feminists are all for gender equality, until it butts up against multicultural pieties. They then lose intellectual coherence, as the Sunday night debate's tortured evasions demonstrated. But if they truly believe niqabs do no harm to the women wearing them, or to their daughters, or to the social fabric, then they should have taken the honourable public position that Bill 62 is wrong, no matter how unique Quebec's religious history is, and be prepared to lose political ground over it.

Alternately, NDP leadership hopefuls could look at Bill 62 as a teaching moment for interrogating the gap between their alleged feminist principles and their willingness to apply them universally. Then they may conclude that Quebec is walking the walk on gender equality for all Quebec women, where the NDP only half-heartedly talks the talk.

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