QUESTIONING THE VALUE OF THE VALUES CHARTER

In the name of intercultural harmony, the government of the Parti Québécois proposed to make it illegal for a practicing doctor to wear a kippah, a nurse to wear a cross, a daycare worker to wear a hijab or a university professor to wear a turban. Nothing good could come from such obviously discriminatory measures. Yet to the shock and dismay of many observers in Québec, the proposals were quite popular. Indeed the proposals appeared to be so appealing to the public that the previous Government made them central to its proposed Charter of Values which it believed would be the key to giving it a majority in a spring 2014 election.

The obvious targets for potential violation of these so-called values were Muslims, Jews and Sikhs. Indeed while concerned with the impact of such legislation, the greater fear was that persons identifying with these communities would the object of increased stigma. Indeed these worries were given legitimacy as the debate gave rise to a heightened expression of prejudice in the public sphere and this was especially apparent when following the commentary in social media.

The debate to which the Charter of Values gave rise produced a number of observations about the display of religious symbols that were not supported with evidence. Often the assertions made by its supporters seemed counterintuitive. For example, it was assumed that those Muslim women in the public service would be ready to remove their hijabs to keep their jobs (and that includes those purportedly forced to wear them). But if indeed, as some pro-Charter supporters assumed, the husbands were forcing wives to wear the hijabs than it follows that they would be unlikely to remove them and hence would lose their jobs. Conversely those removing the Hijab were likely to have been able to do so to begin with and hence were unlikely to have been forced to do so. Charter supporters argued that those wearing visible religious symbols could not perform government functions in a neutral manner. This observation which seems rather unfounded was presented as self-evident by many Charter supporters. The Government insisted that relatively few supporters of the Charter were motivated by prejudicial sentiment despite public opinion surveys suggesting otherwise. The government insisted that the ban on religious symbols did not constitute a rights violation. Yet Quebecers were advised by the President of their province's Human Rights Commission that the proposed law contains several infringements on individual rights and freedoms. The Canadian head of Amnesty International has also issued a similar warning. But the Charter's chief Ministerial spokesperson, Bernard Drainville, dismissed these opinions as just one amongst many. Yet another unfounded assumption was that the removal of visible religious symbols would reduce acts of terrorism. Those defending the Charter of Values pointed to the success of similar practices in France. But few experts on questions of immigration, integration and diversity across the globe look at France as a model in that regard. In fact, observers from abroad are far more inclined to look to Canada as a model.

In the case of France an essay by French Sociology Professor Ahmed Boubeker reveals just how challenging and problematic the implantation of French secularist law and the societal divisions to which it has given risen. The defeat of the Parti Québécois in the April 7th election dealt a severe blow to its proposed adoption of a Charter of Québec Values. The essays included in this volume were written prior to the defeat of the Parti Québécois and hence addressed the theoretical and practical problems associated with the Charter as well as its implications for harmony and cohesion. Several of the essays offer evidenced-based insights from the fields of sociology, psychology and politics. The arguments offered remain very relevant to whatever direction the discussion takes about the place of religion in society.

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