

# WHO BELONGS IN QUEBEC?

Identity Politics in a  
Changing Society

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## Chapter 1

### Blowing on the Embers of Intolerance

The bar was packed, and everyone was in good spirits when I arrived at Iknox, a small pub full of flat-screen TVs on Quebec City's Grande Allée, for an exclusive 2016 US presidential election viewing party for members of the press tribune, as well as politicians and their staff from the National Assembly. I had been to Iknox once before for a beer and knew about their delicious European hot-dogs. I ordered one immediately. The place was fast filling up.

Members of the various Quebec political parties and journalists rarely agreed on anything, except when it came to who should be the next president of the United States, but this was an unusually cohesive group—united in its jubilation as the first results came in. We were impatient to put the past two years of nearly incomprehensible campaign madness behind us, and we knew we were about to bear witness to history, as the first woman made it to the Oval Office.

There were two large cardboard cutouts of the candidates at the entrance to the bar. A colleague and I posed smiling on either side of a beaming Hillary Clinton, whom we were sure would become the first woman president. Canadians, in general, almost

overwhelmingly supported Clinton for president. An Ipsos poll conducted on behalf of Global News on November 6, 2016 found 76 percent of Canadians thought Clinton was the best choice for the United States, and 82 percent thought she would be better for Canada.<sup>4</sup> A Mainstreet poll found that 68 percent of Canadians say they would have voted for Clinton and 17 percent for Trump.<sup>5</sup>

We would indeed witness history, but it wasn't at all what we expected. By midnight, the once jovial party had turned somber. No one spoke. We barely moved, not even to re-fill our drinks. We downed them quietly and then stared for a long time into the bottom of our glasses before putting them back on the table. The bar that had been packed was now less than half full. I could feel a ball of anxiety in the pit of my stomach. My colleagues all had the same incredulous expression on their faces. There was still time for the results to turn around, but somehow we knew that wasn't going to happen.

"Should we go?" I asked.

They nodded.

Once outside, I could feel a heaviness on my chest: why was I so affected by the results of another country's presidential election?

Any political journalist anywhere could have told you that night in November was the beginning of drastic change. That Christmas, in my annual letter to friends and family, I wrote, "I have a lot of apprehension for 2017 .... There is constant concern that the words we write and the words we say could incite violence. Although I'm worried about this, right now is also one of the most exciting and important times to be a journalist. And I

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<sup>4</sup> From a Global News Ipsos poll: Leslie Young, "Canadians rooting for Hillary Clinton to become president: poll" Global News, November 6, 2016, <https://globalnews.ca/news/3047708/canadians-rooting-for-hillary-clinton-to-become-president-poll/>.

<sup>5</sup> From a Mainstreet/Postmedia poll released November 8, 2016.

feel like I'm in the best position to make a difference."

When I wrote that, I had no way of knowing that a gunman would walk into a mosque only a month later with an assault rifle and a 9mm handgun, open-firing during evening prayers. We later learned that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's reaction to Trump's Muslim travel ban had, in part, pushed the shooter over the edge. Was Trump's presidency emboldening bigots and racists? What sinister undercurrent was taking hold of the political and social climate south and now north of the border?

A group of Ontario Tech University professors summed it up in the international *Journal of Hate Studies*: "Following Trump's win, posters plastered on telephone poles in Canadian cities invited 'white people' to visit alt-right websites. Neo-Nazis spray painted swastikas on a mosque, a synagogue and a church with a black pastor. Online, a reactionary white supremacist subculture violated hate speech laws with impunity while stereotyping and demonizing non-white people. Most strikingly, in January 2017, Canada witnessed its most deadly homegrown terrorist incident: Alexandre Bissonnette, a right-wing extremist and Trump supporter, murdered six men at the Islamic cultural centre of Quebec City."<sup>6</sup>

We learned that fake news stories shared on Facebook and other social media networks had influenced the US election's outcome.<sup>7</sup> An emerging alt-right movement saw people openly acknowledge they were white supremacists and publicly declare their anti-immigration and pro-Nazi views.<sup>8</sup> Less than a year after the infamous Charlottesville riots in Virginia, which had left one

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Perry et. al., "The Dangers of Porous Borders," *Journal of Hate Studies*, 14, no. 1 (2019): 53, accessed November 11, 2019, <http://doi.org/10.33972/jhs.124>.

<sup>7</sup> Danielle Kurtzleben, "Did Fake News on Facebook Help Elect Trump? Here's What We Know," *NPR*, April 11, 2018, <https://n.pr/2KaR9JM>.

<sup>8</sup> Katie Dangerfield. "White Nationalist Groups on the Rise, Planning More Rallies," *Global News*, August 15, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2Kqqvgj>.

person dead and injured dozens of others, the *Montreal Gazette* revealed in May 2018 that a well-known neo-Nazi recruiter was living and operating in Quebec's biggest city.<sup>9</sup>

During a scrum in the days following the Quebec City mosque attack, Premier Philippe Couillard deplored how it had become cool to brag about being racist.<sup>10</sup> Identity politics was nothing new in Quebec—the many sides of the ongoing debate about Quebec secularism and a potential ban on religious symbols had created a firestorm of headlines over the years. But was it now coming to a boiling point? Couillard wanted Quebec politicians to tone down the rhetoric, and he made a plea for collaboration from all parties in the National Assembly.

In *Protecting Multiculturalism*, political scientist John McCoy analyzes the tensions surrounding issues of diversity and immigration in Canadian culture and attempts to identify several of its contributing factors. He describes the concept of “xenoracism” as targeting people “who are perceived as foreigners—most especially Muslims.” “Xenoracism is intertwined with the seemingly endless global War on Terror,” he writes. “The fear of ‘Islamic terrorism’ that the War on Terror has generated has helped to stimulate public concerns over visible diversity and immigration in Western societies.”<sup>11</sup> And this is undermining support for Canada's long-established multiculturalism policy. However, in Quebec, where multiculturalism was never embraced with the same warmth as in English Canada because it adheres “to a more ethni-

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<sup>9</sup> John Milton et. al., “Exclusive: Major Neo-Nazi Figure Recruiting in Montreal,” *The Gazette*, Montreal, May 21, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2rAVDD9>

<sup>10</sup> In a media scrum on January 31, 2017, with anglophone National Assembly reporters, Couillard said, “It’s okay to say, ‘I’m a racist.’ We’ve heard that. ‘I can say it now. I’m proud of that.’ How can someone be proud of that? How come nobody reacts when someone says that?”

<sup>11</sup> John S. McCoy, *Protecting Multiculturalism: Muslims, Security, and Integration in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018), 3.

cally rooted vision of national identity,”<sup>12</sup> there are other factors at play. McCoy explains that, “There was concern among nationalists that immigrants were increasingly being integrated into the Anglo minority in Quebec, a trend that was viewed as potentially detrimental to Québécois culture.”<sup>13</sup> In other cases, even French-speaking immigrant populations are overlooked or ignored by Quebec’s francophone majority, as Cheik Tidiane Ndiaye, an immigrant from Senegal writes. In Quebec City, where he lives, he says, “Visible minorities are most often invisible.”<sup>14</sup>

This idea of invisibility is echoed by sociologist Diahara Traoré, who writes that in Quebec, “we don’t see” Muslim women from West African countries. “Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, with more and more preponderant scientific research and discussion about Muslims in Western societies,” she explains, “the silence of Muslim women from Sub-Saharan Africa is burdensome.”<sup>15</sup>

Quebec nationalism, coupled with “the hyperbole of a growing anti-Islamic social movement—a movement that is present, growing and increasingly militant in Canada,” as McCoy writes, could be what’s at the root of an ongoing debate in Quebec about lowering the number of immigrants the province accepts. The CAQ, elected in October 2018 campaigned on a policy to reduce immigration levels by 10,000 (or 20 percent of current levels),<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> McCoy, *Protecting Multiculturalism*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> McCoy, *Protecting Multiculturalism*, 103.

<sup>14</sup> Cheik Tidiane Ndiaye and Webster, “Québec, 29 Janvier 2017: Je me souviens,” in *11 brefs essais contre le racisme pour une lutte systémique*, ed. Christian Nadeau (Montréal : Les éditions Somme toute, 2019), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Diahara Traoré, *Des musulmanes ouest-africaines au Québec: Entre subversion et conformité* (Montréal: Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 2019), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Once elected, the CAQ government modified its rhetoric slightly, saying this would be a temporary reduction while it brought in reforms to Quebec’s immigration legislation. It also said that it would return to earlier immigration levels by the end of its first mandate.

without fully explaining how it arrived at that number. The party argued that temporarily accepting fewer immigrants would mean more resources available for each newcomer. “*En prendre moins, mais en prendre soin*”—“Take fewer, but take care of them”—became a party slogan. The CAQ had also made election promises to dedicate many of these resources to French-language classes, which it would make mandatory for non-francophone immigrants.

The Liberal Premier Philippe Couillard countered that lowering the number of immigrants when Quebec had a labour shortage was simply bad public policy—and he accused the CAQ of trying to profit from a growing populist movement south of the border. In one memorable Question Period in the National Assembly, Couillard’s response to CAQ leader François Legault was quick and immediate: “I’m very afraid, Mr. Speaker, that the [CAQ] is blowing on the embers of intolerance, as it has done in the past.”<sup>17</sup>

Couillard has been mocked for his erudite mastery of the French language. He once fired back at a journalist’s question he disdained, with a quote from a French translation from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, saying: “What do you want, a pound of flesh, a little blood?” This time, though, journalists seized upon Couillard’s retort, which was widely reported.

Couillard himself would repeat his comments about blowing on the embers of intolerance several times as the Liberals tried to paint the CAQ as not only anti-immigration, but also anti-immigrant. On May 28, 2018, the Quebec Liberal Party tweeted a new quote from the Premier. “Blowing on the embers of intolerance is not [only] talking about immigration levels.” Couillard now said, “It presents a foreigner as someone who must be excluded.”

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<sup>17</sup> All translations are my own. Louis Gagné, “Immigration: Couillard accuse Legault de ‘souffler sur les braises de l’intolérance,’” *Le Journal de Québec*, March 9, 2016, <https://bit.ly/350QLWr>.

The inflammatory comments and prejudiced policies that have dominated American politics since the 2016 election cannot easily be dismissed as a foreign problem. Quebec has its own problems—religious symbols worn in the public sector, the growing number of asylum seekers crossing into Canada at the US-Quebec border, and the challenge of defining a national Quebec identity, to name just a few—and they are serious and divisive. The CAQ has already tried to address some of these controversial issues and has been rewarded with great acclaim as well as a swift backlash.

The CAQ has also been criticized for its view that neither systemic racism nor Islamophobia exist in Quebec. When the Liberal government proposed to hold public consultations on systemic racism, the CAQ and the Parti Québécois opposition argued this was the equivalent of putting Quebecers “on trial.” After the CAQ won a Quebec City by-election in a traditional Liberal stronghold a year before the general provincial election, Couillard decided to cancel the consultations, fearing the controversy surrounding them might lead to defeat. The writer and activist Webster describes his frustration over this decision:

It’s a very ethnocentric vision of Quebec and its demography. I find this attitude so condescending, each time someone says, ‘There’s no racism here,’ ‘It’s worse in other places,’ or ‘You don’t understand, it’s not really that.’ As if our opinion didn’t count; as if...what minorities experience or think doesn’t have the same value as people in the majority.<sup>18</sup>

Will the new government be able to find solutions for the issues that divide us in Quebec *without* blowing on the embers of intolerance that risk igniting the biggest racial and class conflicts

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<sup>18</sup> Ndiaye, “Québec, 29 Janvier 2017: Je me souviens,” 24.



of our time? Those embers, periodically stoked, have been burning for a long time. In the next chapter, I look at how we got here. There's a long history of language and secularism debates in Quebec, filled with important nuances that need to be explored.