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Although the social upheaval created by the Quebec provincial government's Bill 21 seems to be a distinctive made-in-Quebec fiasco, efforts by governments to either force ethnic and religious minorities to wear clothing or to take off such clothing and religious symbols have a long and depressing history. Democratic societies rarely engage in such policy and regulations (contemporary France is an exception) but over centuries other sorts of governing authorities have done so, sometimes to little effect and, in certain cases, as steps toward far more extreme policies of separation and denigration.

Jews in medieval Christian Europe and parts of the Muslim world were forced to wear conical yellow hats (yellow is a running theme in the phenomenon), while Jews in the old Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth were subject to sumptuary laws, which limited the kinds of cloth and the amount of jewelry women could be seen wearing in the street. The Czarist empire imposed a variety of semi-effective regulations, which were aimed at compelling Jews to give up their distinctive clothing. These, in the early nineteenth century, led to resistance from Jewish communities and a recourse to wearing traditional clothes as a form of resistance to enforced assimilation. In early twentieth-century Turkey, Ataturk's modernizing regime banned the wearing of the fez, which it linked with the old Ottoman Empire whose cultural and religious affiliations it meant to erase. Canadian residential schools, run by the Catholic and Anglican churches, strove to remove all markers of Indigenous identity from the children over whom they took educational and religious control. Photographs of these schools' classrooms present rooms

full of youngsters in uniform-like get-ups and blunt-cut haircuts on both boys and girls, erasing any sign of ethnic custom or background.

In 2019, Bill 21 is the outcome of a more than decade-long dance by three very different ruling provincial governments to devise some kind of “balance” or “middle ground,” whose outcome would be a law limiting the ability to wear one’s overtly religious clothing or head covering while serving in a “coercive” or “official” role. The foundation of such a “middle ground” can, ironically, be traced back to a report issued by two government appointed “wise men” – renowned philosopher Charles Taylor and the historian and sociologist Gérard Bouchard. Their report on “religious accomadation” has, unfortunately, provided government bureaucrats and ministers with would-be intellectual and ethical cover for their efforts, which have at no time succeeded in finding a “middle ground” or “balance” because there is none.

In Quebec, too, events and laws enacted by the French government asserting “laicization” – the notion of a religiously cleansed public realm – lurk, though more covertly than the Bouchard-Taylor Report’s efforts at accommodation.

Often what one reads in op-eds on the subject is incomprehensible. The Quebec version of this tangle is made even denser by its connection with a post-separatist era’s assumptions regarding what “identity,” “values” and a “secular public sphere” might be in a province with unique cultural and religious history. Often there is – as with so many cultural squabbles in Quebec – the sense that the government’s chosen road stands as an assertion of difference from the rest of Canada.

There are many related conundrums and embarrassments: the Duplessis-era crucifix that hangs in the National Assembly and is referred to by governing ministers as mere “patrimony”; the signs posted around Montreal under the previous Liberal government designating churches

under renovation as “Notre patrimoine – c’est sacré”; crosses and religious statuary in place at a host of French-language high schools and CEGEPS whose buildings were, for most of their existence, Catholic convents, monasteries or schools.

Any reading of Bill 21, with its limitations on new hires to many civil service positions, and the regulation that those grandfathered into these jobs will not be allowed to change their position or rise in the professional ranks, is, obviously, on any ground, whether legal, ethical or simply based upon basic human respect, reveals it to be a reprehensible restriction of the targeted person’s rights and selfhood. It is an assault on their chosen or inherited identity.

There is no middle ground on such efforts. One might expect them in Czarist Russia or under a genocidal Turkish regime. A democratic country of laws like Canada offers no fair ground for a government’s restriction of individual identity and behaviour as it is founded in one’s religious or ethnic tradition. When government ministers and leaders strive to argue why such restrictions are necessary, they descend to demagoguery, to legal semantics, to naked politicking under the guise of social welfare.

An old phrase from the height of Joseph Stalin’s Soviet terror comes into view: *the engineer of human souls*. Anyone who makes excuses for taking on such a role is not worthy of a vote and is a danger to us all.