

## **Media, Public Opinion and the Debate over Reasonable Accommodation in Quebec**

**Jack Jedwab**  
**Executive Director**  
**Association for Canadian Studies**

In February 2007, the Government of Quebec created a commission to look into the accommodation of practices associated with cultural differences. The Commission was asked to establish an accurate portrait of practices of accommodation connected to diverse cultures, to conduct a vast consultation across all the regions of Quebec to find out beyond the surveys and spontaneous reaction what Quebecers really think about the issues and to make recommendations to the government to ensure that the practices of accommodation respect the common values of Quebecers. As to the common values highlighted by the Government were “equality between men and women”, the “primacy of the French language” and the “separation of the State from Religion”. Chaired by two respected scholars Gerard Bouchard and Charles Taylor, the Commission emerged against the backdrop of controversies around the accommodation of minority religious groups. Thus, despite a mandate to address cultural difference much of the focus of Commission deliberations centered on minority religious practices that appeared to be a growing concern to many Quebecers and were described by some of the province’s opinion leaders as being in contradiction to the population’s common values.

The co-chairs of the Commission determined that holding open public consultations across the province would help them meet the desire objectives of securing public input into the deliberations. The risk associated with such a province-wide consultation was that participants would use the forums to share observations and/or express frustration in derogatory terms over minority behaviours they deemed either inappropriate or unacceptable. There was a related risk that the public consultations would invite derogatory and/or controversial remarks to be made about minority groups. That the consultations were going to be widely followed by the media further risked encouraging those seeking a platform for their views. On the other hand, the idea that Quebecers needed to openly express their views was a described as some form of direct democracy and an opportunity for catharsis on the part of those Quebecers who desperately wished to air their concerns (put another way they wanted to get their issues out of their system). The Commissioners had the option of establishing rules to curtail excessive language as did the media but that risked raising the question of whether participants were being censored. To their credit, when certain individuals did engage in overly racist or anti-Semitic remarks the Commissioners did step in and express their strong disagreement. That which follows will examine Quebecers opinion about the role of the media over the course of the hearings. We are not looking at specific media rather at general impressions on the part of the population.

The report of the Commissioners concluded that the media played a key role in shaping opinion around issues of accommodation. The Commissioners contended that “Throughout our private and public consultations, the media were constantly blamed for giving in to sensationalism, exaggerating, distorting and selecting, displaying a lack of responsibility by sowing discord, emphasizing stereotypes, kindling emotionalism, widening the gap between Them and Us, and encouraging xenophobia.” The criticism of the media appeared in many submissions to the Commission as well as in testimony and commentary offered during the public forums. A Léger Marketing conducted in August 2007 revealed that 55% of Quebecers believed that the media reacted excessively to requests from religious minorities. The same survey also showed that, according to nearly 60% of the respondents, the media should display greater responsibility.<sup>32</sup>

The commissioners referred to several representatives of the Montréal media (over 15 according to a cursory list) formulated criticism that was no less harsh. Here are some excerpts: “the basic rules of the trade have not always been respected,” “our profession has talked a lot of crap,” “the media deserved to be blamed,” “they turned what was no more than a scratch into an open wound,” they “were an incredible disinformation machine,” they “made a hell of a racket.” Other journalists spoke of “spurious articles,” of “media irresponsibility,” of a “tremendous lack of rigour,” of an “accommodation hunt,” of “a crisis fabricated from start to finish by the media,” of “alarmist media coverage,” of “the media terribly adrift,” of “trivial isolated incidents blown all out of proportion,” of “a distorted image of Quebecers’ attitudes,” and so on.<sup>33</sup> Let us add, too, editorialists’ criticisms of the media.<sup>34</sup>

But the Commissioners noted the welcome criticism required some qualification. A rigorous examination of the media would reveal notable diversity in the work of reporters and columnists, the print and electronic media, radio and television, the types of programs as well as between English and French language media. In effect, it is important not to generalize about the role of the media. Also it would be inappropriate to exonerate the public which is not without the ability to react to media excess. Indeed, on several occasions, the media coverage that the Commissioners regarded as irresponsible reflected the anxieties expressed by a not insignificant number of Quebecers.

Shortly after the announcement of the Commission, Quebecers identified elected officials as the source that needed to show the more responsibility in reducing tensions between communities (38% « beaucoup plus » et 38% « un peu plus »). Les autres groupes et intervenants obtiennent pour leur part des résultats similaires, soit les médias d’information (29% des répondants croient qu’ils devraient faire preuve de beaucoup plus de responsabilité), la majorité du Québec (28%), les minorités du Québec (28%), les leaders religieux et communautaires (28%), les cours de justice et les organismes de protection des droits humains (27%) et les écoles (24%).

**Table 1**

**In order to reduce tensions between communities, do you believe the following groups should show a lot more responsibility, somewhat more responsibility or the same degree of responsibility (n=1001)**

	<b>a lot more responsibility</b>	<b>somewhat more responsibility</b>	<b>or the same degree of responsibility</b>	<b>Don,t know/refuse</b>
Elected officials	38%	38%	21%	3%
Media	29%	29%	39%	3%
The majority of Quebecers	28%	42%	28%	2%
Quebec Minorities	28%	39%	29%	4%
Religious and community leaders	28%	34%	35%	3%
The courts and human rights organizations	27%	33%	35%	5%
Schools and community organizations	24%	38%	35%	3%

About half those surveyed (46%) believe that the majority of Quebecers reacted appropriately around the debates over minority cultural and religious practices. As observed in Table...it is the media that is viewed as having most exaggerated around the debates over minority cultural and religious practices.

**Table 2**

**Minority cultural and religious practices have received considerable attention in Quebec recently. Do you think the following groups have exaggerated, reacted appropriately or did not take the matter seriously enough?**

	Reacted in an exaggerated way	Reacted appropriately	Did not take the matter seriously enough	Didn't know/ Refuse to respond
Media	55%	30%	12%	3%
Quebec Minorities	45%	31%	17%	7%
Quebec's Majority	26%	46%	24%	4%
Action Démocratique	26%	37%	21%	16%
Parti Québécois	15%	43%	30%	12%
Parti Libéral du Québec	13%	42%	34%	11%

When it comes to opinion around media's treatment of the accommodation debates it is younger Quebecers and in particular those under the age of 35 that believe the media were exaggerating with some 61% holding that view versus 48% of those over 35 who believed the media were exaggerating the matter. Some 54% of francophones felt that the media was exaggerating, a view held by 60% of non-francophones. Quebecers living in the regions were less likely to feel that the media was exaggerating than were persons residing in the bigger cities.

Although many Quebecers may feel that the media treatment of the accommodation debates was exaggerated, looking at Quebec public opinion on specific accommodation issues gives the impression that much of the population was more concerned about tone than substance. Differences in opinion between francophones and anglophones on particular matters, rightly or wrongly described as "accommodations" may also help explain differences in media coverage between the French and English language press. For example, on the question of whether Muslim women should be allowed to wear the Hijab in public some 64% of francophones agreed while 85% of Anglophone agreed.

As to the idea of Muslim women teaching in a public school with Hijabs some 33% of francophones agreed as compared with 81% of anglophones. As to Muslim girls wearing hijabs in public schools it is agreed upon by 36% of francophones surveyed versus 77% of anglophones. As to whether Quebec society should create a code of religious and cultural conduct for minorities to follow it is supported by 60% of francophones surveyed versus 37% of Anglophones. As to whether Quebec society should try harder to accept minority groups' customs and traditions the view is supported by 26% of francophones surveyed versus 76% of anglophones.

Quebecers considered themselves relatively well informed about the workings of the commission on reasonable accommodation. When asked, 58% of Quebecers said that they were aware of the conclusions of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission. Some 55% of francophones described themselves as aware compared to 70% of non-francophones. In retrospect they also felt that there was a crisis that needed to be remedied. Less in four in ten francophones agreed that there was no real crisis. By contrast, a majority of non-francophones (54%) did not feel that there was a real crisis. Less than one in three Quebecers agreed that the report of the Bouchard-Taylor commission made an important contribution to public debate over reasonable accommodation. Indeed as revealed below only six percent of Quebecers strongly agreed that the Commission made an important contribution.

**Table 3**  
**Responses to the question “The Bouchard-Taylor Commission Report made an important contribution to the public debate over reasonable accommodation”**

	Total	French	Other
<b>Total Agree</b>	31%	28%	44%
<b>Strongly agree</b>	6%	5%	9%
<b>Somewhat agree</b>	25%	23%	34%
<b>Total disagree</b>	57%	61%	43%
<b>Somewhat disagree</b>	34%	35%	29%
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	23%	26%	14%
<b>Don't Know/Refuse to Respond</b>	11%	11%	13%

Source: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies

Surveyed after the Commissioners delivered their report the majority of Quebecers agreed that the media exaggerated the issues associated with minority accommodation. Francophones were less likely than non-francophones to agree that the media exaggerated. But perhaps some nuance is warranted when it comes to how strongly this view was held by Quebecers. As observed below, one out of five Quebecers felt strongly that the media exaggerated while one in three felt somewhat that way.

**Table 4**  
**Responses to the question “The media exaggerated the issues associated with the reasonable accommodation of religious minorities”**

	<b>Total</b>	<b>French</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Total</b>	1056	835	220
<b>Total Agree</b>	54%	53%	60%
<b>Strongly agree</b>	20%	19%	27%
<b>Somewhat agree</b>	34%	34%	33%
<b>Total disagree</b>	40%	43%	32%
<b>Somewhat disagree</b>	24%	25%	18%
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	17%	18%	13%
<b>Don't Know/Refuse to Respond</b>	5%	5%	9%

Given the Commission’s conclusions around the role of the media it is perhaps not surprising that the people that felt that the media exaggerated the issues that are more likely to agree that the Commission made an important contribution to the public debate over reasonable accommodation. As revealed below the people least inclined to hold the view that the media did not exaggerate were least likely to agree that the commission’s report made a valuable contribution.

Table 5

Responses to the question “The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation” and

	The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation			
The Bouchard-Taylor Commission Report made an important contribution to the public debate over reasonable accommodation	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Strongly Agree	10.6%	3.4%	5.2%	8.5%
Somewhat Agree	32.3%	34.6%	22.0%	6.8%
Somewhat Disagree	25.3%	37.1%	40.8%	33.3%
Strongly Disagree	27.6%	15.2%	19.2%	45.2%
Don't Know/Refuse to Respond	4.1%	9.8%	12.8%	6.2%

## The Role of the Media and Views on Integration and Assimilation

Is there any meaningful difference in the views on accommodation issues between those Quebecers that felt strongly about the role of the media and those who offer the media a milder rebuke in their response to the survey? To determine that we examine the degree to which persons across the spectrum of opinion around the role of the media view specific issues arising from the accommodation debates. Some of the issues, address broader questions of diversity and integration while others are look at particular cases that were the object of considerable media attention over the course of the Commission's mandate. We noted earlier the percentage that felt strongly the media exaggerated versus those who felt moderately that way. Some one in four moderately disagreed that the media exaggerated while under one in five felt strongly that the media did not exaggerate. In the table below we see that those most likely to feel that the media exaggerated were most inclined to value diversity as illustrated in the their responses to a question around whether Quebec society is enriched by its ethnic and cultural diversity. Only in the case of those Quebecers who least felt that the media was exaggerating do the majority not value Quebec's ethnic diversity.

Table 6

Responses to the question “The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation” and

	The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation			
Quebec society is enriched by the diversity of cultural groups	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Strongly	37.5%	19.7%	10.8%	9.7%
Somewhat Agree	42.6%	60.0%	43.6%	23.9%
Somewhat Disagree	13.0%	14.4%	36.0%	40.9%
Strongly Disagree	5.6%	4.5%	5.2%	23.3%
<b>Don't Know/Refuse to Respond</b>	1.4%	1.4%	4.4%	2.3%



Those who were strongly or moderately in agreement that the media exaggerated the the issues associated with accommodation were least likely to agree that immigrants should give up their customs and traditions while those who were more sympathetic to the media treatment of the issues were most inclined to want newcomers to give up their customs and traditions.

Table 7

Responses to the question “The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation” and

	The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation			
Quebec immigrants should give up their customs and traditions and become like the majority of the population	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Strongly Agree	15.3%	18.8%	24.8%	36.4%
Somewhat Agree	23.3%	27.2%	32.0%	36.9%
Somewhat Disagree	38.1%	39.3%	34.0%	21.6%
Strongly Disagree	22.8%	11.2%	6.8%	3.4%
Don't Know/Refuse to Respond	.5%	3.4%	2.4%	1.7%

It is not surprising that there is considerable divergence across the spectrum of opinion around the media’s role and the degree to which it is felt that Quebecers should make greater efforts to accept the customs and traditions of minorities. Amongst those feeling strongly that the media exaggerated the majority believe that Quebecers need to be more accepting while very few Quebecers feel as such amongst those strongly disagreeing that there was exaggeration.

Table 8

Responses to the question “The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation” and

	The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation			
Quebec society should make greater efforts to accept the customs and traditions of minorities ...	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Strongly Agree	22.1%	7.0%	6.4%	5.6%
Somewhat Agree	34.6%	35.5%	20.4%	8.5%
Somewhat Disagree	27.6%	46.8%	45.2%	31.1%
Strongly Disagree	15.2%	9.3%	27.2%	54.8%
Don't Know/Refuse to Respond	.5%	1.4%	.8%	.0%

## The Role of the Media and Issues of Accommodation

Much of the debate around the issue of accommodation has focused on the place of religion in public institutions. It is fair to argue that for several decades as religion has become less important in the lives of Quebecers the provincial government and opinion leaders expressed ongoing concern about the presence of religion in educational and political institutions. The debate will likely persist for years to come and the media and will undoubtedly continue to play an important role in the way much of the discussion is interpreted. In the tables below we look at how the four groups across the spectrum of views about the media's role in the debate envision questions around wearing the Hijab in public schools and the presence of the crucifix in public institutions. It is worth noting that in 2009 whereas some 70% of Quebecers were unfavorable to the allowing the students and/or teachers to wear the Hijab in public schools, some 60% were favorable to allowing a crucifix in the classroom of a public school and some 67% were favorable to maintain the crucifix above the House speaker's seat in the Quebec Parliament. It is worth noting that the Bouchard-Taylor Commission recommended that it be moved elsewhere in the Parliament. That proposal which found little support from the public was swiftly rejected by the majority of Quebec legislators. The explanation for why there is relatively less opposition to the crucifix in public institutions is attributable to the idea that it has been interpreted as part of the historic heritage of Quebecers and for many therefore stripped of its religious existence. That said a Quebec court ruling in 2010 required a Quebec municipality to remove a crucifix from its council chambers and the decision elicited very little relatively little fuss.

On the issue of wearing the Hijab in public schools, the Table below reveals that a majority of those who feel that the media exaggerated believe it should be permitted while those seeing the media's role less favorably are less likely to accept the Hijab.

Table 9

Responses to the question “The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation” and

	The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation			
Muslim girls should be all allowed to wear the Hijab in public schools	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Strongly Agree	23.6%	7.3%	5.6%	2.3%
Somewhat Agree	31.0%	30.9%	24.9%	15.3%
Somewhat Disagree	20.8%	35.1%	34.1%	18.8%
Strongly Disagree	23.1%	24.4%	34.9%	63.1%
Don't Know/Refuse to Respond	1.4%	2.2%	.4%	.6%

There is also much divergence around the extent to which teachers in public schools should be allowed to wear Hijabs. Although those feeling that the media exaggerated are the most favorable to it being permitted, the majority of that group do not support hijab wearing teachers.

Table 10

Responses to the question “The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation” and

	The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation			
Teachers wearing Hijabs should be allowed to teach in public schools	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Strongly Agree	25.3%	7.3%	7.2%	2.3%
Somewhat Agree	22.1%	28.7%	17.3%	10.2%
Somewhat Disagree	24.0%	34.0%	30.9%	19.3%
Strongly Disagree	27.2%	28.4%	43.8%	68.2%
Don't Know/Refuse to Respond	1.4%	1.7%	.8%	

Those Quebecers most sympathetic to the media’s coverage of the reasonable accommodation debates were most likely to agree that the crucifix should be allowed in classrooms in the province’s public schools. That said, the majority of persons most likely to feel the media exaggerated agree that the crucifix should be allowed in the classroom.

Table 11

Responses to the question “The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation” and

	The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation			
The crucifix should not be allowed in the classrooms of public schools	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Strongly Agree	28.7%	20.5%	24.5%	39.8%
Somewhat Agree	27.8%	38.2%	37.3%	23.3%
Somewhat Disagree	15.7%	23.0%	25.7%	16.5%
Strongly Disagree	25.9%	13.8%	10.0%	14.2%
Don't Know/Refuse to Respond	1.9%	4.5%	2.4%	6.3%

Table 12

Responses to the question “The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation” and

	The media exaggerated the issues associated with reasonable accommodation			
	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The crucifix above the President’s seat in the National Assembly should be moved elsewhere in the Parliament Building				
Strongly Agree	25.3%	9.6%	7.2%	14.8%
Somewhat Agree	17.1%	16.6%	16.8%	6.3%
Somewhat Disagree	15.7%	32.7%	29.2%	19.9%
Strongly Disagree	37.3%	38.0%	46.4%	50.6%
Don’t Know/Refuse to Respond	4.6%	3.1%	.4%	8.5%

Media's influence on public opinion on integration and accommodation

If the media had a significant influence on public opinion over the course of the Commission hearings a shift in attitudes might be expected on the issues, Yet the survey below reveals that between 2007 and 2009 (a year after the Commission submitted its report) there was no meaningful change in views on the part of francophones. If there was some attitudinal change occurred it was on the part of the province's non-francophones. The stronger conclusion is that the views held by Quebec francophone on these issues are not erratic and rather reflect particular perspective on the place of cultural difference in the public and private doma

Quebec	2009		2007	
	Francophone	Non-Francophone	Francophone	Non-Francophone
Quebec society is threatened by the influx of non-Christian immigrants	40%	32%	32	34
Quebec immigrants must give up their customs and traditions and become more like the majority of Quebecers	58%	32%	59%	46%
Quebec society should try harder to accept minority groups' customs and traditions	25%	74%	19%	64%
Muslim girls should be allowed to wear hijabs in public schools	32%	63%	36%	54%



## Conclusion

There is little doubt that the media played an important role in the manner in which the public understood debates about reasonable accommodation of cultural difference. But there are limits on the influence of the media on public opinion. Ideally, research on its role in the debate needs to go beyond public perception and assess actual media coverage, examine the range of media, look at where people get their information and then examine their views on questions of reasonable accommodation. Only in this way can we fully address the critical question of whether media was giving expression to the views of its readership, orienting opinion in a certain direction or striking some balance between the two. The Commissioner's were very critical of the role of the media and strongly inferred it bore much responsibility for the difficulty in thoughtfully addressing issues of accommodation.

The Commissioners referred to several examples where media coverage erred in specific cases that were described as accommodations. Yet surveys across the period commencing with the creation of the Commission to its final report show relatively little change in the views held by Quebecers around the issues of integration and accommodation. That suggests that the media may have had less impact on public opinion some observers assume. It may therefore be a question of the media's tone amongst many who believe that the media exaggerated the accommodation issues. It is important to note that despite Quebecers opposition to various aspects of accommodation, relatively little has emerged by way of legislation to reflect some of the restrictions that the population purportedly favors. That may be explained that opinion around such matters is sufficiently soft that the government does not feel compelled to take action on matters that may violate provision of the Quebec Charter which paradoxically yield considerable support amongst the population.