

# The French Review

*From the Editor's Desk*

After he was elected President in the spring of 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy moved quickly to create the Ministère de l'Immigration, de l'Intégration, de l'Identité nationale et du Développement solidaire. He named Brice Hortefeux as Minister. Many protested the creation and title of this ministry because it seemed to set up some sort of mythical identity which immigrants residing in France (especially those from the Maghreb or Sub-Saharan Africa) apparently did not and do not possess, even though they might well have long time French citizenship and the rights that go with it. It also suggested that those immigrants, citizens, children of immigrants, or otherwise, would have to take responsibility for integrating themselves and becoming "French" according to some kind of unwritten code in a society to which many already belonged.

During the summer of 2009 as France began to anticipate the regional elections to be held in March of 2010 Nicolas Sarkozy delivered a speech to the assembled National Assembly and Senate on 16 June in which he began to define French identity: "Je veux le dire solennellement: la burqa n'est pas la bienvenue sur le territoire de la République française." He went on to say that this was not a "problème religieux..." but about the "...liberté et... dignité de la femme. C'est un signe d'asservissement." (*Le Monde* 30 July 2009, Edito du Monde). Initially, a "commission d'enquête" was established, but this was soon downgraded to a "commission d'information," which gave itself six months from 1 July to come up with a report on the state of the question of the burka in France. From the outset many members of the UMP (Sarkozy's party) proclaimed that there should be a law, including the president of the UMP in the National Assembly, Jean-François Copé. Many Socialists and others opposed this idea, and *Le Monde* pointed out that according to the "Direction centrale du renseignement intérieur (DCRI) only 367 women currently wear the burka in France. In December Brice Hortefeux, now Minister of the Interior, estimated the number at 1,900 and referred to the practice as marginal, but defended a law forbidding the burka in the public services while saying that one could just as well pass a parliamentary resolution which would not have the force of a law (constitutional experts say that a law would not meet the constitutional norms set by the European Convention of the Rights of Man) (*Le Monde* 17 December 2009).

In fact, members of the UMP do not all agree on what course to take as evidenced by the remarks of former socialist, Eric Besson, now Minister of Immigration, Integration, National Identity, and the Development of Solidarity, and Xavier Darcos, current Minister of Labor. In reference to the burka, Besson went as far as to say that "Notre République doit interdire cette atteinte à la dignité humaine dans l'ensemble de son espace public," in spite of the legal problems. He also announced his intention to tell prefects to consider the wearing of the "voile intégral" as sufficient reason for denying ten-year residency cards and as evidence that any woman who wears the burka in public demonstrates that she is not sufficiently "integrated" in French society, one of the requirements to become a French citizen. Naturally, many human rights groups and political opponents spoke out against such a law. A number of Muslim dignitaries saw Sarkozy's and his ministers' statements as attacks on Islam, and some women objected that such a law would be a denial of freedom of choice and that it presupposed that all women who wear a burka or niqab have been coerced to do so. Others fear

the spread of the conservative Islamic movement called "salafisme" in France, a movement which insists that women wear the burka. But many moderate Muslims, members of the different political parties, and scholars believe that such interdictions will only succeed in radicalizing moderate Muslims. This includes Mohammed Moussaoui, the moderate head of the Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM), who while opposing the burka nonetheless feels that an imposed solution would be considered as a new affront to Muslims.

It was Nicolas Sarkozy who as Minister of the Interior in 2003 opted to create the CFCM to favor a moderate form of Islam in France. Unlike the veil law of 2004, the current proposals do not involve the principle of "laïcité" which was paramount in the 2004 law, where the neutrality of the state towards religion was invoked for the K-12 levels since it is agreed that children should not have to be subject to religious propaganda of any kind when their judgment is not fully formed. This is not true at the university level, where students are assumed to have fully developed their intellect and ability to make choices concerning religion. Although the new law seems to have been generally accepted, many French Muslims feel that the 2004 law was a blow to Muslim women's rights (*Le Monde* 27 June 2010). By the time you read this there will most likely be a resolution passed spelling out precisely where women who wear burkas can or cannot wear them. It will have been passed shortly before the regional elections of March.

As the election campaign continued to heat up, Brice Hortefeux was caught on film in Seignosse (Landes) during a UMP political congress between 4 and 6 September, making what many thought were stereotypical and racist remarks about Maghrebians while in conversation with Amine Benalia-Brouch (his father is Algerian and his mother Portuguese), a young UMP party member. What he said in Benalia-Brouch's presence was "Quand il y en a un, ça va. C'est quand il y en a beaucoup qu'il y a des problèmes" (*Le Monde* 11 September 2009). This followed hard on the heels of the forced retirement instigated by Hortefeux himself of Paul Girot de Langlade, a prefect who had made a racial slur in front of a black French woman of Guadeloupean descent responsible for security when going through security at Orly airport on 31 July: "On est là où? On se croirait en Afrique." "De toute façon il n'y a que des noirs ici" (*Le Monde* 18 June 2009). Hortefeux, himself, had already been caught making racial slurs in January of 2009 when he referred to Fadela Amara, Secrétaire d'Etat chargée de la Politique de la ville, as "une compatriote" (referring to their Auvergnat heritage) before going on to say "comme ce n'est pas forcément évident" (*Le Monde* 12 September 2009). Azouz Begag, former Minister for Equal Opportunities from 2005-2007, had already claimed that Hortefeux was a racist in his book *Un Mouton dans la baignoire* in 2007 and called Hortefeux a liar in his initial portrayal of what had happened in Seignosse.

It is not a coincidence that during a private meeting with his ministers in November 2009 (the strategy had already been decided on in September) concerning the upcoming March 2010 elections Nicolas Sarkozy had called for "du gros rouge qui tache" during the campaign, an indirect reference to the need for attracting Front National voters by using strong, negative language in rude terms to describe visible minorities, especially Muslims. In fact, this approach was a cornerstone of his presidential campaign in 2007, when he had made security (the lack of it) one of the dominant themes of his campaign (*Le Monde* 1 January 2010). Brice Hortefeux interpreted Sarkozy's words to mean "...affirmez vos convictions, n'hésitez pas à cliver, les Français nous soutiennent" (*Le Monde* 2 December 2009).

On 25 October Eric Besson launched a national debate on the values underpinning national identity and revolving around the question of "ce qu'est être Français aujourd'hui" (*Le Monde* 26 October 2009). At the time he said that he would take the matter up with the French deputies and senators as well as with the European deputies. In announcing this plan, something that has caused a firestorm of criticism in France from the Left and the Right, Besson was reflecting one of the themes of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential campaign of 2007. At that time a poll taken for France 3 and France Info by CSA-Cisco showed that 62% of the French and 81% of those who planned to vote for Sarkozy were in favor of such a debate. Besson said that he would ask prefects and sub-prefects to organize meetings with what he termed "les forces vives de la nation" to take up the question, describe the values

that link the French and uncover "...la nature du lien qui fait que nous sommes français et que nous devons être fiers" (*Le Monde* 26 October 2009). He continued that "Il faut ré-affirmer les valeurs de l'identité nationale..." and that "La burqua est inacceptable et contraire aux valeurs de l'identité." To many this made it look as though French identity might not be compatible with being a Muslim and that Besson was playing the race and religion cards again with a view toward the regional elections. Besson actually admitted this when he added that "Nous n'aurions jamais dû abandonner au Front national un certain nombre de valeurs qui font partie du patrimoine républicain" while specifying that he was referring to immigration and security. He added that the death of the Front National would be the best thing for everyone. In fact, this strategy had been in place since September. Besson had begun things by closing the "jungle de Calais," where illegal immigrants were staying as they tried to find passage to Great Britain (see the remarkable film, *Bienvenue*). He also organized charters to return Afghans who claimed to be political refugees to their homeland and denounced marriages with immigrants whose only purpose was to gain citizenship ("mariages gris").

As part of the "gros rouge qui tache" strategy, Brice Hortefeux proposed a curfew for delinquent minors under the age of thirteen, and Xavier Darcos criticized employers who hired illegal immigrants. Then came the Swiss vote of 30 November outlawing the construction of minarets. UMP member Alain Clément said that France would no longer be France when minarets outnumbered cathedrals. By then many people, including members of the UMP and the government, felt that things had gone too far and that perhaps the "debate" had gone awry. One minister was quoted as saying "On voit que l'identité nationale est un sujet dangereux." Another stated that "...ce débat est une opération purement politique depuis le début...les ministres appliquent tous la consigne du président en même temps, cela devient lourdingue" (*Le Monde* 2 December 2009). President Sarkozy reacted quickly by canceling his participation in a colloquium entitled "Qu'est-ce qu'être français?" organized for 4 December. He was already aware of the negative reaction to the debate and the comments of his ministers and had said in a speech on 12 November commemorating the Armistice and given in La Chapelle-en-Vercors that "A force de cultiver la haine de soi, nous avons fermé les portes de l'avenir." On the other hand, as has so often been the case for President Sarkozy, he resorted to the tactic of what I would call "double discourse," an approach reminiscent of what some called the "pompiers/pyromane" approach to describe how he dealt with the French urban riots of 2005 while Minister of the Interior. In the same speech, and after praising diversity and "métissage," he said that "on est Français parce qu'on regarde la chrétienté et les lumières comme deux versants d'une même civilisation."

Unfortunately, there was yet another crisis when Nadine Morano, the Secretary of State for the Family, said in a speech in the Vosges on 14 December that "on ne fait pas le procès d'un jeune musulman. Sa situation, moi je la respecte. Ce que je veux, c'est qu'il se sente français lorsqu'il est Français. Ce que je veux, c'est qu'il aime la France quand il vit dans ce pays, c'est qu'il trouve un travail, et qu'il ne parle pas le verlan...C'est qu'il ne mette pas sa casquette à l'envers. C'est qu'il essaye de trouver un boulot, et qu'on l'accompagne dans sa formation. C'est tout ça. Et je crois que si on veut être porteur de paix, on doit accepter l'autre dès qu'il respecte les lois" (*Le Monde* 16 December 2009). SOS-Racisme reacted by saying that it was "de la responsabilité du premier ministre de mettre un terme à l'expression, légitimée par les institutions, de ce racisme décentralisé" (*Le Monde* 15 December). Mohamed Moussaoui was indignant over this "portrait-type d'un Français musulman, avec une casquette à l'envers, parlant verlan, rechignant à trouver un emploi" (*Le Monde* 16 December). The Union of Jewish students of France said the the debate "est le théâtre de préjugés racistes."

Even Pope Benedict XVI got into the act in his Christmas message, calling on all countries to welcome immigrants who have fled famine and intolerance. Members of the UMP such as François Baroin, himself a deputy, called for a suspension of the debate, saying that it could only serve the purposes of the Front National and divide the French. Alain Juppé, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, and Dominique de Villepin (all former Prime Ministers under Jacques

Chirac) also criticized the debate. While President Sarkozy called it a "débat noble" whose objective was to reflect on the "conditions d'intégration des étrangers accueillis dans l'hexagone" (*Le Monde* 17 December) on Canal+ on 16 December and said that the debate would be limited to national identity and immigration, analysts such as the demographer and historian, Olivier Todd, said that "Ce que Sarkozy propose, c'est la haine de l'autre" (*Le Monde* 27 December). He added that the debate had been presented as the nation against Islam when in fact statistics show that the process of integration is succeeding in France and that the Muslim population is, generally speaking the most secularized ("laïcisées") and the best integrated in Europe thanks to its higher percentage of mixed marriages. Yazid Sebeg, the Commissary for Diversity and Equal Opportunities in the Sarkozy government also spoke out against the debate, which, he said, had spun out of control (*Le Monde* 16 December 2009). In the same editorial *Le Monde* said that by presenting immigrants, especially those from Muslim countries, as a threat to French identity, those making such comments were conveniently forgetting all those immigrants who have lived in France for many generations and have been subject to inequalities and discrimination. The writer added that the effect was to stigmatize all French people who are Muslim (many immigrants from the Maghreb and Sub-saharan Africa are not) and to run the risk of adding fuel to the fire of those radical Muslims who preach a militant if not dissident kind of separatism or "communautarisme."

A poll taken by CSA which appeared in *Le Parisien* showed that a majority of the French (50%) said that they were not satisfied with the way the debate was being carried out, while 25% thought that it was and 25% had no opinion; 34% felt that it should continue, and 29% that it should be stopped (*Le Monde* 21 December). Besson plunged ahead and said that the debate would continue until the end of 2010 and that in January 2010 he would present the first 50,000 responses (6-7% were on the website he created and openly racist or xenophobic) from the debates held in the 100 local meetings all over France. (*Le Monde* 4 December). Besson also defended the comments as part of free speech. In the meantime the Front National is going up in the polls. Nicolas Sarkozy is going down. At the end of 2009 a poll taken by IFOP and Sofres found that Sarkozy is now unpopular among 63% of the respondents and that nearly two out of three do not have confidence in him or approve of his programs (*Le Monde* 31 December).

In the face of the problems raised above and dissatisfaction of the French on a number of other fronts President Nicolas Sarkozy appears to have had some second thoughts about his rhetoric. In his annual message to the nation delivered on 31 December he used the word "fraternité": "Je souhaite que 2010 soit l'année où nous redonnerons un sens au beau mot de fraternité qui est inscrit dans notre devise républicaine. "Respectons-nous les uns les autres, faisons l'effort de nous comprendre, évitons les mots et les attitudes qui blessent. Soyons capables de débattre sans nous déchirer, sans nous insulter, sans nous désunir" (*Le Monde* 31 December). It remains to be seen whether or not President Sarkozy is simply reverting to a tactical manoeuvre in using this conciliatory language or whether he really intends to carry out a more moderate inclusive approach to the question of identity, immigrants, and religion. Eric Besson plans to discuss the debate in January and release a number of "propositions" on 4 February 2010. Those of us who love France hope for less division and more harmony than we have seen in the last six months in the country of "Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité," but words will have to be transformed into positive actions, not divisive political slogans.

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