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Liberals accused of hiding report on French decline

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Quebec Opposition Leader Mario Dumont accused the Liberal government of political interference for hiding a demographic study that predicts francophones will eventually be outnumbered in Montreal.

The Liberal minority government deliberately delayed the report's release in order to advance its new immigration policy, Dumont charged on Thursday, an accusation that Liberal Culture Minister Christine St-Pierre flatly denied.

"This is something for which the government will have to answer," Dumont said on Thursday. "In my mind it is completely unacceptable."

The 2006 report, written by demographer Marc Termote, suggests the use of French is overall on the decline in Montreal and by 2021 francophones will be outnumbered by allophones and others who do not claim French as their mother tongues.

French is also experiencing a downward trend outside Montreal but at slower rates, Termote found.

He concluded the overall decline of French can be explained in part by low birth rates among francophones, and immigration patterns in which newcomers choose English as their primary language.

He told Montreal newspaper La Presse that the government delayed publishing the report because of its politically-charged conclusion.

St-Pierre responded Thursday by saying she respected Termote, calling him a "great researcher."

"But Mr. Termote should stick to research," she said.

St-Pierre said the study is part of a larger picture of Quebec's linguistic situation, which will be published soon.

Opposition wants to know why

But Dumont demanded an explanation from the Liberal minority government, especially given recent changes to the province's immigration targets, which were raised 20 per cent in the fall, from 45,000 to 55,000 people per year.

That new immigration policy is full of "lies" and "little secrets" in light of Termote's conclusions, Dumont said.

Parti Québécois MNA **Daniel Turp** said the study's shelving looks like a coverup. "It seems that it's the [Liberal] ministers who are blocking the publication of the study," he said in French on Thursday.

Report echoes reasonable accommodation debate

In the fall, opposition party l'Action démocratique du Québec had asked that immigration targets be frozen at 45,000 per year to allow the province time to review programs and policies designed to "integrate" newcomers to the province, especially language training.

How immigrants integrate into Quebec society has been a focal point of public debate for over a year, following a controversial move by the town of Hérouxville, which adopted a code of conduct for foreigners that included a ban on stoning women.

Montreal has long been seen as the province's Achilles heel for French given the high rate of immigration to the island.

The PQ did not support a freeze on immigration targets, preferring to stress the importance of policies and rules to stop the general erosion of French in Quebec.