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WHAT'S NEW UNDER THE SUN?

In the midst of the vacation period last July the government made public its project on the future of Quebec society, articulated in three reports : the Fortier report on privatisation, the Scowen report on de-regulation and last but not least, the Gobeil report on how to revise government functioning and its organizations.

We are providing here a brief resume of the major orientations and key recommendations in the "rapport Gobeil" which touch the education sector in general and particularly the colleges.

Headed by Paul Gobeil, president of the Quebec treasury board and in charge of the negotiations in the public sector, the study group, commonly known as "Le Comité des sages" or the "committee of the sages" consists of :

- M. Michel Bélanger, President of the Board and chief administrator of the "Banque Nationale du Canada";
- M. Pierre Lortie, President of the Board and chief administrator of Provigo Inc.;
- M. Yvon Marcoux, First vice-president and administrator of Savings Bank;
- M. Jean-Claude Rivest, Political consultant to the Premier Minister.

Last May 26, four months after its nomination, the committee had completed its mandate and had submitted to the Premier all its recommendations and conclusions.

In a forty odd page report, part of which dwells pretty much upon the obvious, the committee of experts tries to explain how essential it is to bring about changes in resource management, how to eliminate duplication and how to adjust government policy to real needs. According to the report, after twenty years of unchecked development, it is time to bring the state apparatus down to a size corresponding to the present realities and to the resources available.

Much more than "behind closed doors" fantasies and wishful thinking of high finance, the Gobeil report seems to be assuming the role of the political spokesman for changes demanded by the business establishment. Bill 37, the regulation on collegial education (Régime pédagogique), and the Canada-Quebec accords are but a few examples of this kind of thinking already put into practice in the education sector.

RESUME OF THE GOBEIL REPORT

Defender of the current philosophy advocating decentralization and privatization, the Gobeil report is basing its analysis on the premise that "FOR A FEW YEARS NOW THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN FIGHTING A CHRONIC FINANCING PROBLEM", which according to the report stems "FROM COMPLETE SEPARATION BETWEEN, ON ONE HAND, THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN COMMITTING EXPENDITURES AND ON THE OTHER, THE RESPONSIBILITY TO COME UP WITH THE NECESSARY REVENUES FOR THE SMOOTH FUNCTIONING OF THE INSTITUTIONS". It maintains that in a situation where there are strong demands, where there is no initiative on the part of management, and where there are no limits to these demands, there can be no financial equilibrium possible. Consequently the Gobeil report recommends : "DECENTRALIZATION AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF RESOURCES, INTRODUCTION OF MODALITIES OF FINANCING WHICH WILL GIVE THE INSTITUTIONS REAL MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES WHILE AT THE SAME TIME PRESERVING EXISTING MAJOR PROGRAMS PARTICULARLY ACCESSIBILITY TO SERVICES". It rings a bell!

Concerning specifically the education sector , the committee stresses the point that despite very substantial budgets granted to the education sector of 7,825 millions, of which 5,347 millions went to the primary/secondary level, 2,357 millions to post-secondary and 127 millions to the administrative level, along with the real desire since the quiet revolution to modernize the education sector and to make it more accessible, Quebec is not necessarily endowed with quality educational services.

Basing its evaluations on such arbitrary criteria as : the general aptitude and knowledge tests, the rate of failure and course withdrawals, and the levels of student enrolment in both public and private sectors, the committee estimates "THAT THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN QUEBEC IS INFERIOR COMPARED TO THOSE IN OTHER JURISDICTIONS (elsewhere) AND THE GAP WITH THESE OTHER JURISDICTIONS WITH WHICH OUR YOUNG WILL HAVE TO COMPETE DURING THEIR PRODUCTIVE YEARS IS ACQUIRING CONSIDERABLE PROPORTIONS".

In order to remedy this state of affairs "A BETTER BALANCED RELATION MUST BE ESTABLISHED IMMEDIATELY BETWEEN THE AMOUNT OF RESOURCES COMMITTED TO A GIVEN GOVERNMENTAL FUNCTION (institution) AND THE RESULTS OBTAINED". In order to be able to accomplish that, they claim it is necessary to put in place "A PROVINCIAL MECHANISM FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE INSTITUTIONS, PERSONNEL, AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE". Already included in the "Règlement du régime pédagogique du collégial" (Regulations for the collegial education) this mechanism is not the only one meant to assure the quality of services. It is but a part of the solution. The other, according to the committee, rests upon the task of sensitising the parents and making them more responsible, as well as the students, who must press on with their rights to a quality education.

In order to achieve this objective, the Gobeil report recommends that instead of further financing educational institutions: "SUBSIDIZE DIRECTLY THE PARENTS" (in the case of post-secondary, the students) by installing a system of "STUDY BONDS" equivalent to the cost of education of an individual at a given level of studies. The students and parents may therefore be in a position to shop around as they please among the various educational institutions for the one best suited to their tastes and at the same time, according to the report, acquire "THE RIGHT TO HAVE A MORE DIRECT SAY ON THE SERVICES AND ON THE UTILIZATION OF RESOURCES". Such a level of responsibility will even allow

and lead to "A HEALTHY COMPETITION BOTH AMONG SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS" especially with a provincial system of evaluation of schools and students.

At the collegial level, the report develops the idea of the introduction of tuition fees equivalent to those in continuing education. Thus it advocates tuition fees for those students in the general sector who exceed 5 semesters and those in the professional who exceed 7 semesters. However the report underlines the fact that establishment of the system of "study bonds" at this level is not a priority and that first of all one has to start with an administrative reorganization. The report thus recommends "A COMPLETE DECENTRALIZATION OF MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN AND MATERIAL RESOURCES AS WELL AS DECENTRALIZATION OF THE NEGOTIATIONS OF COLLECTIVE AGREEMENTS, IN ORDER TO GIVE COLLEGES MAXIMUM FLEXIBILITY TO ADAPT THEIR FUNCTIONING AND ORGANIZATION TO PARTICULAR NEEDS". This decentralization must also be accompanied by a modification in the structure of the Board of Governors reducing it from 21 members to 8; that is : the director general, 4 members nominated by the minister and 3 members chosen by consensus. "THIS SELECTION METHOD WILL FOSTER COHESION AND SOLIDARITY AMONG BOARD MEMBERS".

Furthermore, having evaluated that the average workload of a teacher at the College level is 13 hours per week (sic), including repetition of courses and sections without having to supervise research, the committee recommends that given "THAT THE WORKLOAD OF A TEACHER AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL RESEMBLES THE WORKLOAD OF TEACHERS AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL, IT MUST CONSEQUENTLY APPROACH 20 HOURS". According to the report, each additional hour demanded from teachers translates into a saving of 30 million dollars, except perhaps for the first year which will limit this saving to 9 million because of the job security mechanisms.

The section of the report on education concludes by recommending an increase in the workload for university teachers from 4 courses per semester to 6 and nothing less than the closing down of the head office of the "Université du Québec".

CONCLUSION

The political plan of the government announced through the pages of the "Rapport Gobeil" is clear enough and our experience in trying to negotiate our collective agreement within the frame of Bill 37 confirms this tendency. The government is searching at all cost and without providing precise data or indepth analysis to find ways to reduce the role of the state as purveyor of services and to introduce a new mode of management adaptable to private enterprise.

Finally, in a report full of generalities and free for all statements, the government is trying once again to reduce the notion of services to society, which includes, social, health and education services to a bare minimum and replace it by the laws of the market place. To achieve more with less. To increase the quality of services while cutting down on investments thus the law of supply and demand will take over to regulate matters!

Is the government trying to make us swallow its dollar-and-cent philosophy calling it a project for the society?