
The Educational Mission of the Quebec National Assembly

by Pierre Duchesne

The bicentennial of Quebec's parliamentary institutions in 1991 inspired us to cast a backward glance at our democratic beginnings, recalling the critical importance of the Constitutional Act, 1791; of the first elections, in June 1792; of the first session of Parliament in December 1792; and the parliamentary reforms that led to the National Assembly as we know it today. After the bicentennial, the National Assembly launched a project designed to make Quebec's parliamentary institutions better known, understood and appreciated.

As part of its Educational Mission, the National Assembly has produced documents and has organized activities for students at the primary and secondary levels and for their teachers.

Primary Schools

To promote a better understanding of democracy, the National Assembly in 1992 produced a videotape entitled (*Democracy in the Schoolyard and Beyond*, aimed at schoolchildren in grades five and six: To date, over 5000 French-language copies and over 500 English-language copies of the videotape and its activity guide have been distributed to primary schools. Active participation in the decisions and putting them into practice has enabled schoolchildren to understand what democracy means.

An activity, launched very recently by the Speaker of the National Assembly, *Parlement Écolier* (Mock Parliament) is intended for school children in grade six. They are invited to write laws, elect a "member of the legislature", and attend a sitting of the National Assembly. Since 1997, over 6000 schoolchildren have taken part in this learning activity by writing a piece of legislation in

class, by electing one their classmates "member of the legislature", by debating three selected pieces of legislation in class, and by listening to televised debates chaired by the Speaker of the National Assembly. We prepared two activity guides, one for teachers and one for the elected "member". This activity is designed to help children nearing the end of primary school to develop an awareness of:

- the legislative work of MNAs and the workings of the National Assembly, through simulation and role-playing exercises;
- the legislative (or decision-making) process;
- respect for others;
- attention to the ideas of others;
- the importance of the role of each citizen in a democracy;
- the importance of choosing one's representatives well;
- respect for the National Assembly as a democratic institution.

Reports from participants indicate that, through this activity, the National Assembly is contributing to the education of citizens in democracy, and that its efforts are appreciated.

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Secondary level

A number of documents have been prepared for students in the fourth year of secondary school. One of these is *À la découverte des institutions parlementaires du Québec* (*Discovering Quebec's Parliamentary Institutions*), a 168-page volume with transparencies that traces the history of Quebec's institutions from the time of the Royal Government to the present day. So far, we have distributed over 7000 copies of this document, mainly to secondary-school teachers, faculty of education students and professors, and Cégep and college teachers. There is continuing demand for this document, which is also available on CD-ROM as part of the series used to teach Quebec history.

Another document, *Faites votre histoire en théâtre!* (*Your History as Theatre!*) suggests various plays that can be put on using eight themes, from the beginning of parliamentary government to the time when women were given the right to vote.

A book and video cassette for teachers entitled 1791-1792: *La démocratie naissante au Québec* comprises six presentations on the origin of parliamentary democracy in Quebec.

The activities inspired by these documents contribute to citizenship education. The documents have been used in workshops at congresses and forums for secondary-school teachers, and many of them use these educational tools in their classroom. The response indicates a high degree of satisfaction.

Activities for Secondary and Post-secondary Students

The Quiz game: *Tournoi Jeunes Démocrates* is very popular among teachers and students and was inspired by the television quiz show *Génies en herbe* which took place for the eighth time on April 14, 15 and 16, 2000. Its topic is democracy, from ancient Greece to contemporary Quebec. Nine hundred questions are prepared each year. Participants do classroom research on fifteen sub-topics, which include the history of democracy, democracy in the world, charters of rights and freedoms, the various stages in Quebec's political and constitutional history, Quebec's main political parties, elections and election mechanisms, Quebec's parliamentary system, international organizations, and fundamental laws. This year, more than 350 students and 70 teachers took part in the contest.

For many students this event serves as a stimulus to learning. Participating in the activity enables them to assemble the pieces in the great puzzle of history. They learn to work as a team, to persevere, and to consult each other while striving toward a common goal.

The part of the quiz that focuses on democracy in the world opens young people's eyes to events in the rest of the world. School political clubs are invigorated by this activity, because it allows their young members to gain a better grasp of current events through a good understanding of the past, and of political and parliamentary concepts. This activity is also offered to college-level students.

Teachers appreciate this type of activity, because it injects vitality into classroom teaching and promotes learning by allowing students to connect events and to understand the changes and upheavals faced by our constantly evolving democratic society.

The eighth session of the *Forum Étudiant* took place in the Quebec Parliament Building from January 9 to 14, 2000. This simulation of the work of the National Assembly is aimed at college-level students who wish to gain a better understanding of the workings of parliamentary institutions, of the stages in the legislative process and of the multifaceted role of MNAs.

There are two parts to this activity. In the fall, regional forums are held under teachers' supervision. They are followed by the provincial forum, which is attended by about 150 young people. Like the National Assembly, the *Forum Étudiant* has 125 members, and they require administrative support (a secretary general, assistant secretaries, and so forth). Moreover, since the National Assembly's debates are covered by the press, the *Forum Étudiant* puts out a newspaper, the *Vox Populi*, prepared entirely by the students. Over five days, five issues are produced, featuring news reports, columns, and descriptions of the debates.

The *Forum Étudiant* is organized in co-operation with political science teachers. Political science and history teachers run the regional forums and are closely involved in advising the student parliamentarians and journalists at the provincial forum. Experts from the National Assembly also take part. The student parliamentarians prepare the legislative agenda, including speeches, bills, ministerial statements, question period, motions and budget speeches. They elect individuals to parliamentary and administrative offices by secret ballot. The Speaker of the *Forum Étudiant* is also elected by secret ballot of the assembly as a whole. An absolute majority is required to win.

About 30 Cégeps and colleges take part in this activity each year. The *Forum Étudiant* serves as a school in democracy. Young people actually do the legislative work of MNAs, with all the advantages and requirements of the democratic system. They play an active role as citizens.

The *Forum Étudiant* allows participants to identify and experience the various stages of the legislative process, to understand the complexity of the issues before them, and to select strategies leading to solutions appropriate to the political reality. Specifically, the activity promotes:

- knowledge and understanding of the concepts of parliamentary democracy;
- mastery of the skills required in oral and written communication;
- the development of certain intellectual and civic attitudes;
- an increased participation in public life;
- contact between colleges, leading to further educational exchanges.

The participating teachers consider this activity essential to a better understanding of democracy and citizenship and to the development of committed, responsible citizens.

Activities for Teachers

A Mock Parliament for History and Political Science Teachers took place at the National Assembly on October 22, 1994 in conjunction with the 32nd congress of the *Société des professeurs d'histoire du Québec*, held in Quebec City. It was another definite contribution by the National Assembly to citizenship education, this time for the benefit of teachers. A second *Parlement des professeurs* will be held for political science and history teachers at the Quebec National Assembly on Saturday, October 14, 2000. These initiatives strengthen our conviction that we have a role to play in education for democracy and citizenship.

In September and October 1994, the National Assembly organized a forum for Cégep and college teachers entitled *Le parlementarisme: un outil démocratique nécessaire?* The event, sponsored by the the Association of Former Members of Quebec was part of the National Assembly's educational mission and was intended to make college-level teachers more aware of and interested in Quebec's parliamentary democracy. The forum proceedings are available from the National Assembly.

On September 24, 25 and 26, 1998, to mark its 20th anniversary, the Jean-Charles-Bonenfant Foundation, in co-operation with the Association of Former Members of

Quebec and the Quebec Political Science Association held a forum entitled *Le Parlementarisme et les médias*. The event was held in response to requests from college-level teachers and from participants in the forum held in September 1994. The proceedings of this forum are available from the National Assembly.

Every year, the National Assembly hosts two mock parliaments organized by students from various Quebec universities. In addition to hosting and instructing the students during the ten days, the Assembly arranges tutorials with experts in legislation and parliamentary procedure to help them with their work. The *Parlement Jeunesse* celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1999, and the *Parlement Étudiant* will mark its 15th in 2001.

These two student parliaments help to impress upon young people the important role played by MNAs and the Legislative Assembly in safeguarding democracy in Quebec. In the last five years, the *Parlement Jeunesse* has hosted five young Belgians who have taken part in the debates at the National Assembly, and for the last three years young Quebecers have travelled to Belgium for the same purpose. Such exchanges open young people's eyes to the world around them. The *Parlement Jeunesse* is turning increasingly outward, and the *Parlement Étudiant* has also hosted a few foreign students since 1998.

The *Parlement des sage* (Elders' Parliament), organized in co-operation with the *Association de défense des droits des personnes retraitées et préretraitées*, will take place at the Quebec National Assembly on September 11, 12 and 13, 2000. The activity will provide older citizens with an opportunity to address issues important to them, and to gain a better knowledge of the legislative process and the crucial role played by their elected representatives.

The Foundation Jean-Charles-Bonenfant awards every year to four university students a ten-month internship at the National Assembly. Each young person is twinned with an MNA, thus gaining a theoretical and practical knowledge of parliamentary institutions and of the role and work of parliamentarians. The preparation of a research paper enables the student to make a thorough study of one aspect of the parliamentary process. The internship is recognized as a credit course by Laval University.

The web site of the Educational Mission of the National Assembly contains information on all the educational activities organized by the *Service de la production pédagogique* and by the Jean-Charles-Bonenfant Foundation. The site also features an on-line newspaper, *Le Cyberjournal*, and an Education Information Forum (www.assnat.qc.ca).

Le Cyberjournal allows internet users to express their views, either individually or as part of a class, on the subject of democracy. Educational games test their knowl-

edge of the parliamentary system and democratic institutions. The purpose of the newspaper is to allow citizens to discover the democratic tools available to them.

Finally, *La Veille pédagogique* (Education Information Forum) is intended to promote and disseminate the results of research in education for democracy, and to provide professors, researchers, teachers, students and other individuals interested in the subject with a virtual meeting place for obtaining and exchanging useful information.

Conclusion

The purpose of the Educational Mission is to teach young people about democracy and thus help them become committed and responsible citizens.

The activities of the National Assembly promote dialogue and consultation, with the ultimate aim of devel-

oping a well-informed, committed, responsible and vigilant citizenry. The subjects discussed and the themes selected for the forums, mock parliaments and quiz game reflect the major concerns of our society, which often feels the impact of the world's problems and crises.

These activities teach students from the primary to the university level about democratic mechanisms and principles, about the importance of democratic values, about the role of every citizen in society, and about shared responsibility.