

# PARLIAMENTARY CONTROL OF SCIENCE POLICY IN THE QUEBEC NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

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Do members of the Quebec National Assembly control the development and implementation of the science policies of the government of the province? The answer to this question requires an elucidation of the scope and nature of Quebec's science policies. In this article the author identifies the instruments of parliamentary control available to the members and then examines ways in which such instruments are used to control government science policies. In the last part of this paper, he looks at the potential and the limitations of certain measures to increase the MNA's control over the development and implementation of science policies. The issue is one of accountability. In this case accountability as it applies to science policy.

The evolution of science policy in Quebec since 1920 may be divided into three main periods. The years from 1920 to 1965 were characterized essentially by the establishment and growth of university style research institutions. The 1965-1970 period was marked by a desire of the provincial government to acquire institutions oriented more toward applied research. The post-1970 period has seen the development of an explicit science policy by the government.

Bills respecting the establishment of institutions intended to use science as a means of economic development were tabled in the National Assembly (then known as the Legislative Assembly) at the very end of the Quiet Revolution. In March 1966, the Liberal Minister of Industry and Commerce, Gérard D. Lévesque, introduced Bills 6 and 7. The former called for the establishment of a Quebec scientific research council responsible for pure and applied research in engineering, natural and human sciences. Bill 7 called for the establishment, in the form of a corporation, of an industrial research centre to conduct research, in its own laboratories or elsewhere, to develop industrial processes in co-operation with the other parties concerned, and to collect and distribute technological and industrial information. The two bills passed first reading, but the Liberal government was defeated a few months later.

The Union nationale Party came to power in June 1966 after an election campaign based on the need to slow down the growth of government intervention in society. Despite this, it was the UN that set in motion the essential measures that institutionalized research activity in Quebec. Among the institutions established were: Hydro-Quebec's *Institut de recherche en électricité* (IREQ); the Ste-Foy scientific complex; the *Centre de recherche industrielle du Québec* (CRIQ); the University of Quebec and its *Institut national de recherche scientifique* (INRS). During the same period, the UN government also set up the university research committee of the Quebec council of universities.

It should not be thought that the UN government had thereby bestowed upon Quebec an explicit science policy. The debate on Bill 71 respecting the CRIQ proceeded in an atmosphere of considerable confusion. The members of the National Assembly, did not confine their remarks to Bill 71 but took the opportunity to talk about the INRS, the scientific complex and the proposed High Council on Research. It was the first time the members had shown such a strong interest in research, and ten years would pass before such interest was shown again. By the end of the 1965-1970 period, the government had acquired a number of new types of scientific and technological institutions, although it had

not yet made an explicit statement of its views on the science policy question.

The UN government lost the 1970 general election, and the Liberals returned to power. The major research institutions were on the point of reaching full development. The new government felt a need to intervene in order to place more stress on the use of public research funds to solve social and economic problems.

Robert Bourassa, the Premier of Quebec, announced in March 1971 the creation of an inter-departmental committee on science policy. The ministers of Education, Social Affairs, Industry and Commerce, and the Environment were appointed to the Committee, whose terms of reference were to define a science policy suited to the needs of Quebec.

The Committee made its report (*Les principes de la politique scientifique du Québec*) to Cabinet at the end of 1971. It was based on the equation: policy + science = development. The Committee was given responsibility for applying the principles it had expounded. However, it proved to be impossible to proceed to the implementation stage for lack of government activity to co-ordinate. An inventory of Quebec government R&D in 1972-73 showed that it had allocated less than one half of one per cent of its budget to R&D (\$21 million in 1972-73), and that about 35 per cent of its research budget went to support university research. The Committee's work was accordingly dominated by questions related to the latter.

The report of the Committee also recommended the creation of a council on research policy, and this was done by order-in-council in January 1972. The council was intended to be a consultative body with representatives of the universities, industry, the public and quasi-public sectors. Its role was to advise the Interdepartmental Committee on the formulation of science policy and on ways and means of implementing it.

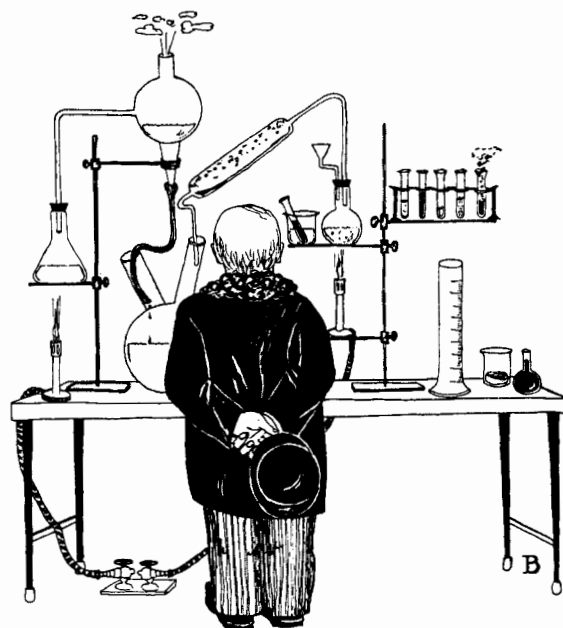
The Committee was abolished at the end of 1975, and its secretariat was converted into a bureau of science and technology, placed under the authority of the Minister responsible for higher education. While the beginning of the 70s marked the emergence of an explicit policy on science and technology, the six or seven years that followed were a somnolent time that came to an end in 1979 with the publication of the government's green paper on scientific research policy in Quebec.

At the end of November 1977, the members of the National Assembly once again demonstrated their interest in science policy in connection with a question for debate referred to the Standing Committee on Education, Cultural Affairs and Communications. A

three-hour debate that was to be confined to consideration of the government's policy on grants to university research was marked by numerous interventions on the government's policies on science and technology, particularly by Liberal members Thérèse Lavoie-Roux, André Raynauld and Claude Forget. The debate also gave an opportunity to two ministers, Jacques-Yvan Morin and Camille Laurin to say something about the green paper on research policy the government was preparing. Mrs. Lavoie-Roux wanted to know whether the green paper would be followed by a white paper, and whether the government had planned any consultation mechanisms to hear the views of the sectors of the community involved with scientific research.

The consultation that followed the publication of the green paper took place in the fall of 1979. Industry, government and universities submitted more than one hundred and fifty briefs to the Minister of State for Cultural Development, Mr. Laurin. The entire process took place outside the National Assembly and at no time did the members initiate a debate on the content of the green paper.

The government's white paper on scientific research policy duly appeared in the middle of the referendum campaign, at the end of April 1980. Once again, the MNAs had had no influence on the policy defined in the white paper: it contained a statement to the effect that the plan of action put forward was based on a consensus that developed during the months of consultation on the green paper.



Members of the National Assembly not only failed to control the development or implementation of Quebec's science policies; they actually dissociated themselves from almost all attempts at the formulation of explicit government policies. It is therefore appropriate now to examine the instruments of parliamentary control available to the MNAs.

## INSTRUMENTS FOR PARLIAMENTARY CONTROL

In a British type political system, like Quebec's, the principle of ministerial responsibility means that the government must be accountable to the elected chamber of the legislature. The control exercised by parliamentarians, particularly those of the opposition parties, over the development and implementation of science policies depends on their being able to criticize and question the government.

The Standing Orders of the Quebec National Assembly provide at least six ways in which criticism can be brought to bear:

- the expression of differing points of view during the debate on government bills;
- the introduction of bills that are opposed to the government's views;
- requests for documents and information through oral and written questions to members of the government;
- dilatory, incidental or privileged motions;
- general critiques delivered during the debate on the inaugural message or the budget debate;
- referral of a question for debate to a standing committee.

However, these instruments of parliamentary control can be used effectively by members only if they have access to reliable information. We must ask therefore, whether the members of the National Assembly possess reliable information on science policies and, further, what means they have chosen in order to exercise their function of parliamentary control of science policies?

Except for industrial R&D, the results of research are in most cases relatively intangible and almost always indivisible. If we also take into consideration the fact that research activities and the results are often fairly technical, we quickly realize that the parliamentarians' task is not an easy one. How can they criticize and question the government effectively when it is engaged in the production or financing of goods and services that are intangible, indivisible and technical?

The control function assigned to parliamentarians would be a very difficult one even if they were perfectly informed. This, however, is not the case. The annual

reports of government agencies and departments that provide parliamentarians with information on science policies generally do not distinguish the human and financial resources devoted to research and parascientific activities from those devoted to their other activities.

Thus, the resources the government allocates to research activities are almost invisible, since for all practical purposes they cannot be identified.

Not only are the human and financial resources devoted to research almost totally invisible, they are also very diffuse in character, since they are allocated, not by a single source, but by almost half of all the agencies and departments of the government. There are, nevertheless, a few major sources, such as the departments of Education, Social Affairs, Agriculture and Communications. MNAs could try to initiate control by concentrating on them. It must be added, however, that the magnitude of the human, material and financial resources managed by these major "users" defies any such attempt, as long as their annual reports do not identify more precisely the resources allocated to research. In a word, parliamentarians are very far from being perfectly informed.

The information presently available to MNAs scarcely enables them to post-audit the implementation of science policies. The question referred to the committee by Mrs. Lavoie-Roux in 1977 shows clearly how difficult it is to control after the fact. The members' remarks dwelt much more on questions of principle than on the broader range of decisions and interests that can be involved in policies on financial assistance to university research, and in scientific research policy. In any case, the control that members sought to exercise over the government at that point had much more to do with a general control over the whole wide field of science policy than with an in-depth look at the specific interests at stake in university research grant policy. Seen from the point of view of parliamentary control, the 1969 debate on the bill establishing the *Centre de recherche industrielle* is similar in all respects to that of 1977.

On the whole, parliamentary control exercised by the National Assembly has been narrow, shallow and lacking in intensity. It should be stressed that while opportunities for *a priori* parliamentary control have been few in number, governments have taken the initiative in stating their views before implementing them on at least a few occasions. Parliamentarians did not try to initiate debate on the government's science policies in 1971, when the report of the Interdepartmental Committee was published, any more than they did during the process of consultation on the green paper. In a word, the members of the National Assembly have

shown great moderation in using the instruments of parliamentary control available to them. They have not tried to advocate principles different from those of the party in power during debates on government bills relating to science and technology. They have not introduced bills relating to science and technology that are opposed to the views of the government. They have not made many requests for documents and information through oral and written questions to members of the government. The few debates on science policies have not led members to make dilatory, incidental or privileged motions. Nor have members seen fit to raise the subject of science policies during the debate on the inaugural message or the budget debate. On a single occasion, a question for debate on the subject of university research grant policies was referred to a standing committee. This was unprecedented: a question for debate had never before been referred to a standing committee.

### **INCREASED PARLIAMENTARY CONTROL OF SCIENCE POLICIES**

To what extent is it possible to increase parliamentary control of science policies in the National Assembly of Quebec? There are two prerequisites for increased control: first, all elements of the government's science policies must be made more visible; second, the terms of reference of those responsible for such policies must be more clearly identified and better defined.

Some of the measures set forth in the Quebec government's white paper constitute a step in this direction. According to that paper the government will be asking its departments and agencies to take an inventory of their research activities. Each department will analyse its approach and its research programs and will make clear how the government's various research goals are being pursued or neglected, and each department will henceforth identify in its annual report the human and financial resources it devotes to the various categories of research activity or assistance to research.

A more precise identification of the human, material and financial resources devoted to research, an explanation of the aims of government programs of research and of assistance to research, and the identification of their contribution to the goals of government or university research, are all measures that will give parliamentarians the information they need to exercise more control over science policies.

In addition the designation, in June 1980, of M. Camille Laurin as Minister of State for Scientific Development and the subsequent appointment of Jacques-Yvan Morin in the November Cabinet shuffle

will enable parliamentarians to seek an accounting from a person with a clearly defined responsibility for science policies. In the government's view, the Minister of State for Scientific Development will be a clear embodiment of the Quebec government's political desire for a coordinated and democratic development of scientific research in Quebec. The Minister would be responsible, in co-operation with the sectoral ministers involved, for the implementation of this plan of action, including the drafting of the associated acts and regulations.

Appointment of a Minister of State does not seem sufficient in itself, however. Consideration should also be given to establishing a special committee of the National Assembly which would meet every three or four years for the purpose of examining in depth government science policies and related programs and activities. The committee could do its work even more effectively if its deliberations were based on a report by the government of its science policies. The committee could be instructed to study the government document and report to the Assembly.

The availability of reliable information, the appointment of a Minister of State and the establishment of some legislative committee are essential measures to ensure parliamentary control of science policies, but they are not enough. The extent, intensity and depth of parliamentary control depend as well on the scientific and technological expertise of the parliamentarians. The few debates that have taken place in the National Assembly on science policies have shown that the members did not feel very knowledgeable in the field. Some went so far as to state this explicitly. Furthermore, it must be recognized that MNAs do not have sufficient time to master in detail all the information relevant to science policy. The segment of the electorate that is sensitive to such policies is so small that MNAs cannot feel strongly motivated to invest their time in learning about what is involved in them. However, the existence of a standing or even a special committee would encourage the opposition parties to assign some of their research personnel to analyze and criticize science policies of the government.

Parliamentary control of science policies in Quebec has been notable for its narrow scope, its low intensity and its lack of depth. Its members, like those of the House of Commons in Ottawa, have much too readily deferred to scientists in this matter. The autonomy science needs has to do with the evaluation of research activities on the basis of scientific merit. The development, implementation and control of science policies is still a question of parliamentary responsibility.

*(Translated from French)*