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# Parliamentarians' Influence on Public Policy: The Case of Education

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*In the 1990s, nearly 35% of Quebec high school students dropped out before graduation. A number of lobby groups, including the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec and the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste, took advantage of the 1994 election campaign to call for a provincial conference on education. In October 1995, Education Minister Jean Garon appointed a Commission for the Estates General on Education (CEGE), which after 16 months of work submitted a report titled *Renewing Our Education System: Ten Priority Areas*. On the basis of this report, Pauline Marois, who succeeded Jean Garon, proposed a far-reaching overhaul of the province's education system. This case study shows that education reform, like other public policies, was the result of work by the government and by advisory bodies. A number of authors assert that the power of representative bodies is in decline, but few studies have analyzed their role in the making of public policy. The aim of this article is to understand the way in which the parliamentarians in Quebec's National Assembly influenced the content of the 1997 education reform.*

The article will analyze the 1997 education reform in an effort to understand (1) the form that parliamentarians' influence took, and (2) at what stage in the reform their influence was most significant. Before answering these two research questions, we must define the terms "influence" and "education reform" and establish the theoretical bases on which the article is constructed.

First of all, "influence" is used in the sense of "policy capacity", in other words, the action exerted by Members of the National Assembly on the other actors in order to promote certain solutions. To rank the MNAs' influence, the article will analyze legislative mechanisms (such as the business of supply and Question Period) and assess the extent to which these enabled MNAs to affect the reform. Influence will be ranked as "strong" where a mechanism enabled an MNA to propose an alternative, the proposed alternative appeared in an implementing document and the MNA's contribution was recognized. Influence

will be ranked as "medium" if an MNA proposed an alternative and it was adopted but without his or her contribution being recognized. Lastly, influence will be ranked as "weak" where the mechanism only allowed an MNA to express his or her opinion on an alternative.

At the conceptual level, "education reform" means the changes made by the government to the Quebec school system that emerged from the following four documents: *A New Direction for Success*<sup>1</sup> (ministerial plan of action), *The Education Reform*<sup>2</sup> (policy statement), *Québec Schools on Course*<sup>3</sup> (educational policy statement) and the *Act to Amend the Education Act*. At the content level, the reform's aims included early childhood intervention, teaching core subjects, giving schools more autonomy and better access to continuing education.<sup>4</sup>

The reform certainly constituted public policy, defined by Lemieux<sup>5</sup> as a set of activities oriented toward the resolution of a public problem. This article will use the theoretical framework formulated by Kingdon<sup>6</sup> and used by Lemieux, to identify the actors and the stages in the process of making public policy. Lemieux identifies four categories of actor: decision-makers, agents, stakeholders and members

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of the public. This study looks only at the decision-makers (elected representatives who have the statutory resources) and the agents (bureaucrats who have the information resources), the latter employed by the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (CSE), the Commission for the Estates General on Education (CEGE) and the Ministry of Education of Quebec (MEQ).

Kingdon's model distinguishes three stages in the policy-making process: problem recognition (when a problem appears on the government's agenda), formulation (when alternatives are proposed, debated and refined) and implementation (when the bureaucrats apply the solutions chosen by the elected authorities). This theoretical framework, which is frequently used in studying public policy in Canada, makes little reference to the role of parliamentarians. Certainly Kingdon mentions the influence of Congress, but parallels between Canadian legislative bodies and the United States Congress are risky. We will therefore round out the model with certain concepts formulated by Wahlke and by Olson and Mezey.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from any theoretical shortcomings, this study has two serious weaknesses. First of all, the ranking of influence is done using a scale that has not previously been tested. Second, the analysis as a whole is based on the verbatim transcripts from the National Assembly's *Journal des débats*, and Howlett and Ramesh warn that official documents rarely explain decision-makers' real reasons for acting as they do.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it is to

be hoped that the article will suggest some interesting food for thought for everyone interested in the role of the legislative branch in modern democracies.

## Results

The 1997 education reform was a major project, and the National Assembly's *Journal des débats* reveals exhaustive parliamentary work on both the reform itself and on the legislative process leading to its adoption. However, this article will rest on parliamentarians' spoken contributions in the Chamber dealing directly with the elements of the reform's content. Table 1 shows the nine mechanisms that will be analyzed, in order of their appearance in the text.

### Stage 1: Recognition

The first mechanism, hearing from educational advisory bodies, arises from the oversight mandate for public bodies that is entrusted to the Committee on Education (CE) under the Standing Orders of the National Assembly.

The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (CSE) is an advisory body created by Act of Parliament whose mission is to advise the Minister of Education via a report tabled to the National Assembly. In order to carry out its oversight mandate and inform parliamentary debate, the CE can meet with representatives of the CSE. For example, on March 29, 1995, the Chair of the CSE presented his views on skills and continuing education, two themes that would be part of the reform. Since the recognition stage consists in getting a

**Table 1**  
**Parliamentary mechanisms with an influence on the content of the education reform**

Stage	Mechanism	Subject	Legis. body*	Influence
Recognition	Hearing from advisory bodies	Behavioural difficulties, meetings in Montreal	CE	None
Recognition	Substantive motion	School boards	NA	Medium
Formulation	Committee-initiated mandate on successful completion of schooling	School autonomy, administrative flexibility	CE	Strong
Formulation	General and special consultations	Governing boards, school autonomy, fee-free schooling	CE	Medium
Formulation	Clause-by-clause study of bill	Teaching materials, best interests of child	CE	Weak
Formulation	Tabling of petitions	Full-day kindergarten	CE	Weak
Implementation	Business of supply	Transitional measures	CE	None
Implementation	Question Period	Budget cuts	NA	None
Implementation	Study of annual reports	Performance indicators	CPA	Weak

\*CE = Committee on Education; CPA = Committee on Public Administration; NA = National Assembly

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problem onto the government's agenda, the Members of the National Assembly were able to take advantage of this forum to convey their concerns to the CSE. However, at the meeting the MNAs only succeeded in getting the CSE to admit that it should pay more attention to the issue of behavioural problems, a theme that was not in fact incorporated into the subsequent reform.

Similarly, on January 31, 1996, the CE adopted a mandate to hear from the Co-Chairs of the Commission for the Estates General on Education (CEGE), which had compiled in a report<sup>9</sup> the views expressed at regional hearings. The MNAs took advantage of this meeting to put questions and make suggestions to the Co-Chairs. For example, the MNA for Verdun found it inconceivable that the CEGE had held only a single hearing in Montreal, when almost half the population of Quebec lives in that city. The Co-Chairs conceded that it might perhaps be necessary to hold another meeting there, but history shows that this never happened. It can be concluded that hearing from advisory bodies was a mechanism that enabled parliamentarians to obtain information but did not give them any influence on the content of the education reform.

Unlike meetings with advisory bodies, it would seem that the tabling of a substantive motion in the National Assembly can have a definite impact. In this case the motion, introduced by the MNA for Marquette and adopted unanimously, said: "That this Assembly ask the [Parti Québécois] Government ... to reassert its confidence in the future of the school boards, which are indispensable partners in the Québec educational system".<sup>10</sup> While some members of Cabinet were debating the place of school boards, and the CEGE was starting its work, this motion signalled that the National Assembly wanted school boards to be maintained. We would therefore rank the influence of this mechanism as "medium" since, although its exact repercussions cannot be determined, the CEGE did not in fact take up the idea of eliminating school boards.

In short, during the problem recognition stage MNAs seemed mostly to listen, to experts and members of the public, and only imposed their point of view when there appeared to be consensus among the parties.

### **Stage 2: Formulation**

During the formulation stage, all the actors debate alternatives. The MNAs who sat on the CE wanted to contribute to this debate and took the initiative of adopting the following mandate: "That the Committee on Education inquire into the conditions for the successful completion of secondary-level education and develop

appropriate proposals and recommendations."<sup>11</sup> After meeting with 30 local educational bodies, the CE submitted 14 recommendations in December 1996. A number of these recommendations were similar to those formulated by the CEGE and some were even integrated into the reform, such as institutional autonomy, curriculum revision and the introduction of full-day kindergarten. It should be noted that when the Education Minister was accused of introducing the reform too hastily, she retorted that the Committee on Education had wanted similar reforms made and made quickly.<sup>12</sup> Since the alternatives favoured by the CE were recognized by the Minister, and since they can be found in ministerial documents, we consider that the mandate undertaken on the Committee's own initiative enabled MNAs to have a "strong" influence.

After consulting the reports of the CE and the CEGE, the government introduced in the National Assembly a *Draft Bill to amend the Education Act*. As ordered by the Assembly, the CE then held public hearings in the fall of 1997 to which interested actors were invited. The MNAs took advantage of their presence to influence the shape of the reform. For example, the MNA for D'Arcy-McGee reiterated the complaints of the Fédération des commissions scolaires on the membership of governing boards within schools and succeeded in getting clause 41 of the Draft Bill amended. Similarly, during the special consultations, the MNA for Marquette voiced the concerns of the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec to the effect that schools with special projects could undermine the principle of student equality. As a result, the final bill required schools to request exemptions for all special projects. In short, by using their voices to reflect the concerns of lobby groups, MNAs were able to exert influence on the shape of the reform. We would however rank this influence as "medium", since it remains difficult to distinguish the influence of MNAs from that of the lobby groups.

Once the bill had been introduced, the CE began its clause-by-clause study. This phase not only allowed MNAs to enhance the bill's provisions but also to slow down its passage and to demonstrate their opposition by systematic obstruction. Although in this case parliamentarians did succeed in annoying the government, their real influence on the bill was "weak". All their amendments were rejected by the governing party, with the exception of one amendment requiring schools to provide textbooks to students and another adding the wording "in the best interests of the student". As a general rule, we note however that MNAs participated actively in shaping the reform and did succeed in influencing its content.

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### *Stage 3: Implementation*

Following passage of the bill by the National Assembly and the unveiling of ministerial plans, the education reform was implemented by the bureaucracy. Between 1997 and 1999, MNAs attempted to control the activity of these agents with somewhat limited success. For example, during consideration of the MEQ's estimates, the MP for Deux-Montagnes asked the Minister what transitional measures would prepare education stakeholders for the revision of the curriculum. The Minister replied that meetings would be organized with stakeholders. This rather vague response was in fact designed to conceal what proved to be the inadequacy of the transitional measures.<sup>13</sup> We therefore do not consider that the business of supply enabled MNAs to exercise influence on the decision-making process.

Nor did Question Period enable parliamentarians to influence the implementation of the education reform. On December 16, 1997, the MNA for Marquette criticized the cuts to the education budget, which in his opinion would undermine implementation. But his criticism did not deter the government from its attempts to reduce the deficit, even though the cuts did in fact slow down introduction of the reform.

Nevertheless, the MNAs did exercise "weak" influence on implementation of the reform during their study of the MEQ's annual reports. In 1998 the Committee on Public Administration (CPA) reviewed the report by the Auditor General of Quebec and used it to criticize the MEQ. The MNAs deplored the disparity and ambiguity of MEQ performance indicators, to which ministerial officials replied that the MEQ was preparing indicators based on achievement assessments. These indicators were in fact later put in place, so we consider that this mechanism enabled MNAs to put pressure on the government and to exercise at least "weak" influence on the implementation of the reform.

In short, MNAs are responsible for overseeing the implementation of policy, but their influence on the education reform appears to have been rather limited than otherwise.

### **Discussion**

This study had two goals: (1) to establish the extent to which Members of the National Assembly influenced the education reform of 1997, and (2) to identify the stage of the policy-making process at which their influence was the most significant.

### *Legislative Authority*

Even though many authors claim to observe a "decline of parliament", the fact remains that MNAs incarnate legislative power and in this capacity are responsible for the passage of legislation. To the extent, then, as Kingdon<sup>14</sup> points out, that major reforms are based on legislative measures, parliamentarians can influence the actual content of such reforms. While our legislative assemblies cannot be compared with the American Congress, we note that public hearings and clause-by-clause study of the bill nevertheless enabled MNAs to exercise a certain influence.

### *Consensus and Dominant Narrative*

However, the analysis found that it was in MNAs' role as representatives of the citizenry, as distinct from their legislative role, that they had the most influence on the reform. In the Committee on Education's independently adopted mandate to investigate successful completion of secondary school, the public hearings on the bill and the presentation of a petition calling for the maintenance of boards, MNAs based their interventions on social consensus, which enabled them to exert significant pressure. According to Kingdon, the existence of consensus on the core of a reform enables parliamentarians to concentrate on the details and to be that much more effective. In this case, consensus was established around the need for an early childhood education policy, autonomous schools and the continuing existence of school boards, enabling MNAs to concentrate on the disputed elements raised by lobby groups and to have more influence on the reform.

### *Committee on Education*

Of the nine mechanisms studied, seven are linked to a parliamentary committee and six of these to the Committee on Education. So if the National Assembly was proactive in the reform, this was to a great extent thanks to the CE. Olson and Mezey<sup>15</sup> argue that "the policy activity of parliaments will be greater" where parliamentary committees and their staff are permanent and have acquired expertise in their specific policy areas. Because the CE is responsible for education and the related public bodies, its members do acquire expertise, as can be seen from the similarities between the Committee's final report on school success and the government's action plan, *A New Direction for Success*. It is possible to generalize the Committee's influence since, according to a National Assembly report,<sup>16</sup> the CE's work directly influenced the process of the appointment of members to the CSE in 2005 and the policy on Aboriginal school success in 2007.



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## Carrying Through the Reform

Lemieux and Kingdon identify three stages in public policymaking. The first, that of problem recognition, occurs when a problem is placed on the government's agenda. In this instance, the most influential actors at that stage were lobby groups and experts who called for and oriented the holding of the Estates General on Education, with the MNAs doing little more than listening to these groups.

The second stage, formulation, enabled MNAs to intervene more directly in the debate. Via the mandate adopted by the CE on its own initiative, the petition, public hearings and clause-by-clause study of the bill, MNAs made the government take into account alternatives they supported, and a number of these alternatives ended up being incorporated into the education reform. We therefore consider, like Kingdon,<sup>17</sup> that at this stage parliamentarians' influence took the form of "specifying alternatives".

As in the problem recognition stage, the MNAs had relatively little influence in the third stage, implementation. According to Lemieux,<sup>18</sup> MNAs exercise little control once legislation has been enacted, because it is the bureaucracy that is responsible for implementing it. As a result, even though on the basis of facts uncovered by the Auditor General MNAs criticized the Ministry of Education, it remains true that the Ministry, the school boards, school principals and teachers were the ultimate operators of the reform.

## Conclusion

In order to better define the role of the legislative branch in modern parliamentary systems, this study has analyzed the influence of parliamentarians in the process of carrying through Quebec's 1997 education reform. The interpretation of the results shows that MNAs exercised influence in their role as parliamentarians, but above all in their role as representatives. This influence flowed to a large extent from the work of the Committee on Education which, thanks to its expertise, was able to modify elements of the reform's content. Parliamentarians played a much more significant role at the formulation stage than at the other two stages.

We realize that the research methods and theoretical bases used in this article are open to criticism. In addition, by treating parliamentarians as a homogeneous group, we pass over the fact that the Official Opposition exercised an influence that in quality and quantity differed from that of government MNAs. However, this article is a first step: an

attempt to encourage further research on the role of parliamentarians in the making of public policy.

## Notes

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2. *Idem*, *The Education Reform – The Changes Under Way*, Quebec City: Government of Quebec, 2005, p. 12.
3. *Id.*, *Québec Schools On Course – Educational Policy Statement*, Quebec City: Government of Quebec, 1997, 39 pp.
4. Ministry of Education, *A New Direction for Success – Ministerial Plan of Action for the Reform of the Education System*, Quebec City: Government of Quebec, p. 21.
5. Vincent Lemieux, *L'étude des politiques publiques*, 2nd edition, Saint-Nicolas: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2002, p. 6.
6. John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, 2nd edition, New York: Longman, 2003, p. 253.
7. See John C. Wahlke, "Policy demands and system support: the role of the represented", in Philip Norton (Ed.) *Legislatures*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 97-123, and David Olson and Michael Mezey, *Legislatures in the Policy Process*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 244.
8. Michael Howlett, M. Ramesh, Anthony Perl, *Studying Public Policy*, 3rd edition, Don Mills, Oxford University Press: 2009, p. 7.
9. Estates General on Education, 1995-1996, *idem*.
10. Quebec National Assembly, *Journal des débats*, 1st Session, 35th Legislature, March 29, 1995, no.°29, pp. 1826-1830.
11. Committee on Education, *Les conditions de la réussite scolaire au secondaire : mandat d'initiative entrepris par la Commission de l'éducation de l'Assemblée nationale*, Quebec National Assembly, December 1996, Final Report, p. 2.
12. Quebec National Assembly, Commission de l'éducation, *Journal des débats*, 2nd Session, 35th Legislature, May 1, 1997, no.°26, pp. 1-20.
13. Louise Lafortune, Colette Deaudelin, preface, *Accompagnement socioconstructiviste – pour s'approprier une réforme en éducation*, Quebec City: Presses de l'Université du Québec, p. x.
14. John W. Kingdon, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
15. David Olson and Michael Mezey, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.
16. Robert Jolicoeur, *Documents de fond publiés par les commissions parlementaires au cours des 35<sup>e</sup>, 36<sup>e</sup> et 37<sup>e</sup> Législatures*, Quebec City: Quebec National Assembly, 2007, pp. 5-6.
17. John W. Kingdon, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
18. Vincent Lemieux, *op. cit.*, p. 92.