

Remarks Regarding Bill 131

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased to see my local MLA, Howard Epstein, and my former Political Science colleague, Leonard Preyra. I have known these gentlemen for quite some time.

For others, let me briefly introduce myself. I taught for 36 years in Dalhousie University, in the Department of Political Science and the School of Public Administration. I also served for a time as Vice-President of Dal. Throughout those years, I conducted research, wrote, and taught, primarily in the areas of local government and intergovernmental relations. In this regard, I always had a particular interest in public education and the governance of school boards.

After retiring, I was elected to the Halifax Regional School Board, following the dismissal of the previous board. I served in that capacity for four years, until this spring.

I decided not to re-offer for a second term, and in what I intended as a private communication with my fellow board members, I set out the principal reasons for that decision. That communication was

subsequently given wide circulation, and I understand some of you may have read it.

I won't belabour the point, but I gave three principal reasons for not re-offering: excessive centralization of the system, which is stifling creativity; failure of the elected board to hold the superintendent accountable; and what seemed like an inexorable drift toward a model of corporate governance.

Now, I don't want to claim that I am clairvoyant. And I certainly did not have any inside information as to this government's intentions, but this Bill, entitled "School Board Members' Duties Clarification Act", would, if passed, have the effect of rendering elected school boards utterly irrelevant, with the possible exception that they would retain the authority to close local schools.

You know, this issue is not new. As a student of local government, I read all about what was then known as "the turn-of-the-century" reform movement. It's premise was that elected boards should deal with policy, while day-to-day administration should be placed in the hands of professionals. Sound familiar? It was a notion taken directly from the model of the business corporation. The "turn-of-the-century" that I studied, however, referred to the period of the 1890's to the early 1900's. The idea did not work then, and it will not work now. It will not work for the simple reason that elected boards are not

the same as corporate boards, and they can't be governed as though they were.

Once you elect a board, whether of a municipality or of a school district, you establish an accountability relationship between the elected board and the local public. As elected members of the legislative assembly, you surely can understand that.

What this Act does is further entrench a conflict between what provincial legislation says elected school boards must do, and what the people who elected those boards want and expect them to do.

There are only two ways of resolving this conflict. One is to relax the strictures contained in provincial legislation, so that school boards actually have room to experiment, to try new approaches in improving student learning, and to respond to community preferences. This is the way to improve education in Nova Scotia.

I ask you to think about this for a moment. Is it not worth considering that the provinces that perform the best nationally and internationally have been moving in just this direction? Should you not consider that in directing boards to "maintain a focus on the achievement of all students..." as stated in the proposed legislation, you might need to give those boards some jurisdictional room and

responsibility to actually do something to promote “the achievement of all students”?

Elected boards have two principal responsibilities, or they should have: to represent their constituents and to govern in the interests of all citizens. These functions can come into conflict, and the test of good governance is that it strikes an appropriate balance. Neglecting the representational responsibilities of boards and shackling their ability to govern in the public interest, as this legislation does, will accomplish nothing but further diminish the value of elected boards and, with it, of local democracy.

There is, of course, a second way of resolving the conflict. The second way is simply to get rid of elected school boards. The corporate model would then pose no conflict for appointed boards, appointed presumably by the province. That, I submit, is the logic of where we are headed with these amendments.

And I don’t believe this path can lead either to a strengthening of local democracy in Nova Scotia or improved achievement of our students.

In closing, I leave you with a challenge: Can you identify a jurisdiction, in Canada or elsewhere, where the quality of education, the achievement of all students, has been improved by tightening the control of central authorities. Because if you cannot, then surely you

**owe it to the citizens of Nova Scotia to not proceed with this
legislation in its present form.**

Thank you.

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