

Cherie Abriel's Law Amendments Speech – March 5, 2018

In 1937, in this very House, Angus L. MacDonald introduced the Trade Union Act. Despite the backlash from big business lobbyists such as the Canadian Manufacturers Association, our Premier at the time will be forever remembered as being able to bring political parties together to have this legislation unanimously passed. Historian Stephen Henderson called it, "Canada's first piece of modern Labour Legislation." This act required employers to bargain with any union chosen by the majority of their employees and prohibited employers from firing workers for forming a union.

Our present day Liberal government, instead of valuing the rights of workers of Nova Scotia, flaunts its majority by taking successive swipes at the collective bargaining rights and negotiated benefits of its hard-working citizens and moves to legislate whatever ill-conceived changes it deems politically expedient.

After using education as a platform for winning the provincial election amid promises to listen to work with the NSTU, the Minister of Education at the time, announced that she was going to repair the damage caused by cuts to the education budget made by the previous government. The 2014 Panel on Education she set up based its data collection not on evidence-based research, but on a random sample of Nova Scotians. Not one active representative of the teaching profession was consulted, yet lobby groups for business such as AIMS were consulted. The Minister then used this erroneous and flawed report to create her Action Plan for Education. She laid out on Page 17 of her report, the negotiated benefits of teachers she wished to remove in order to carry out her "education reform". Again, at no time did she consult with the Nova Scotia Teachers Union to consult on what changes teachers felt were needed to our schools.

The government then used the action plan to carry out a series of "gun to the head" negotiations and feigned surprise when the teachers of this province refused to agree to hand over benefits which had been bargained for over 119 years. Instead, teachers rallied to shine a light on the inadequacies of a system where successive governments have cut programming and services to our most vulnerable students. Teachers refused to accept a contract which did nothing to address learning conditions for students.

Rather than focus on the rallying cries of teachers as they spoke out around the province and through last year's Law Amendments, the government attempted to legislate these voices away by unanimously passing Bill 148. They attempted to use legislation to belittle and silence teachers, without success.

And now the Glaze Report. Avis Glaze interestingly enough is the founder and CEO of a company called Edu-Quest International. Her report appears to be another rushed attempt to silence teachers and perhaps help further the agenda of privatizing our education system. Carried out in just over 3 months and consulting with only 2000 Nova Scotians, very few of these educators, this report is an attempt to use Ontario solutions to deal with N.S. problems. One day following the release of this report, the government announced its intention to adopt all 22 recommendations – recommendations which when implemented in Ontario have thrown their education system into chaos.

Bill 72, by eliminating elected school board representatives will eliminate the voices of over 50 democratically elected women, 7 representatives of the Mi'kmaq people, and 7 representatives of African Nova Scotians. This is a huge step backwards for women and minority rights. It limits the voices of those who have fought for years to be heard. Whether or not this was the planned outcome of this Legislation is not the point. The point is that this is the outcome. If this was not considered in drawing up this Legislation, it shows that the Government is blind to institutionalized sexism and racism. As we speak, women are rallying outside this house in protest of this legislation.

As well, this legislation forcibly removes principals and vice principals from our union and leaves these individuals with no dispute mechanism. Administrators are part of most other teachers union or associations in Canada. These individuals are teachers first – they help with student programming, act as a bridge between parents and teachers, help access services through outside agencies such as mental health services. In Nova Scotia, administrators are the heart of our schools. They do so much more than manage buildings. The collegial relationship which presently exists will suffer as it did in Ontario where administrators and teachers have an extremely adversarial relationship.

Nothing in Bill 72 will result in positive changes for the students or teachers of Nova Scotia. Instead of listening to the experts in our schools, our teachers, this government has chosen to circumvent and silence those voices by directly attacking and dividing teachers from administrators and removing democratically elected representatives. Graham Steele, former Minister of Finance and a practicing lawyer says the legislation is, "as complicated a piece of legislation as the House will ever see. It adds new laws, changes existing laws in dramatic ways, and amends a raft of collective agreements". He also notes that any language about Inclusive Education has been removed from this newly proposed act. Is this intentional, or is this the unintended consequence of this government refusing to slow down and properly consult with Nova Scotians instead of rushing through their punitive legislation.

I know who is not going to benefit from this legislation – the present and future students, teachers and citizens of our fine province. But the question I leave you with today, is just who will be the victims of this ill-thought out legislation and in what unexpected and undetermined manner? By changing these various pieces of legislation, many of which have been built into the fabric of our province over years of governance and successions of governments, we may be causing untold harm to many diverse groups. Do we not owe it to our students to pause this legislation until true consultation can occur? We citizens of Nova Scotia owe it to our children and to future generations to insist that this government halt in its agenda to remove democratic rights of citizens by legislating rather than negotiating and consulting with us. Or is this Liberal government, as suggested by Jim Vibert, simply "A state hierarchy that's self-preserving first, public serving later." I suggest that the strength of spirit of Nova Scotians is far too strong to let any government, majority or otherwise, act with such impunity.