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COMMENTARY, OPINION

## Bill 40's differential treatment of Anglophones demonstrates CAQ's troubled agenda

Written by James Li on November 21, 2019

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Public hearings for Bill 40, which would remove all school boards in favour of service centres, began at the National Assembly on Nov. 4. While the bill fulfills one of the CAQ's election promises, its provision to



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maintain elections for the board of directors of Anglophone, but not Francophone, service centres has proved to be its most controversial aspect. Education Minister Jean-François Roberge **explained that the changes** will streamline an inefficient system and save \$45 million over the next four years. However, the bill is actually a hasty attempt to centralize power. In addition, the bill's misstep in angering the Francophone community should not distract McGill from the CAQ's continued mistreatment of English institutions.

Haphazardly changing the organization of the school system does not improve student education. Groups representing Francophone and Anglophone school boards alike **brought up this point** during Nov. 4's public hearings. Instead, the bill is taking power away from voters, parents, and education professionals, granting the Minister of Education **more executive power**. Civic engagement and academic performance will be diminished, as observed in PEI and Nova Scotia, where Liberal governments recently **removed school boards**.

At the very least, one would expect the government to follow the democratic process in deciding that it is best to remove elections, which means an adequate period for hearings and debate. Unfortunately, this has not happened. The timeline for hearings is unproportionally short considering the magnitude of the proposed changes, and would have been even shorter were it not for **opposition pressure**. The CAQ is working on a tight timeline as they hope to pass Bill 40 before Christmas, causing **speculation** that Premier Legault will use the process of closure to end debate on the bill as he did with the controversial Bills 9 and 21.

The CAQ has continuously exerted its power to the detriment of Quebec's English institutions. While hearings for Bill 40 were running, Legault put the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) **under trusteeship**, accusing it of corruption. The timing of this news is a planned political move, one that effectively silences the EMSB, which **previously filed legal action** over the CAQ forcefully transferring schools to the French system, as well as to **protect its staff** from Bill 21. McGill should be especially wary of Roberge's attempts to stretch beyond his power and impose austerity. As an English institution, McGill has historically already been **treated disadvantageously**; students should be particularly conscientious now, given the CAQ's penchant to handicap Anglophones.

In their rush to pass the bill, the CAQ has attempted to quell Anglophone dissent by changing the bill to allow English service centres to keep elections. Roberge **explains this inequality** by saying "in Canada there is a protection of minorities." While it is not without justification, nor without precedent, to give special privileges to minorities (PEI and Nova Scotia kept their French school boards), it is frankly difficult to believe this supposed care for the Anglophone minority **coming from this government**. The CAQ is trying to placate the Anglophone community; it is afraid of legal challenges under the minority language education rights enshrined in Section 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. **As a result**, Francophones are claiming discrimination, while unsatisfied Anglophones maintain that Bill 40 may still infringe on Section 23 rights because of increased executive power.

The CAQ's propensity to speedily instigate extensive change has backfired at a surprising moment. Education is not nearly as divisive or attention-grabbing as those issues concerning the CAQ's headlining moves, such as Laws 9 and 21, which ostensibly target minorities. However, by upsetting the Francophone majority, the CAQ will potentially face a much fiercer opposition than before. McGill students should also stand in opposition to this violation of democratic principles. In particular, students must make their concerns known to the SSMU and administration, to rein in the Minister of Education and Higher Education whose sweeping reforms **may soon concern universities**.