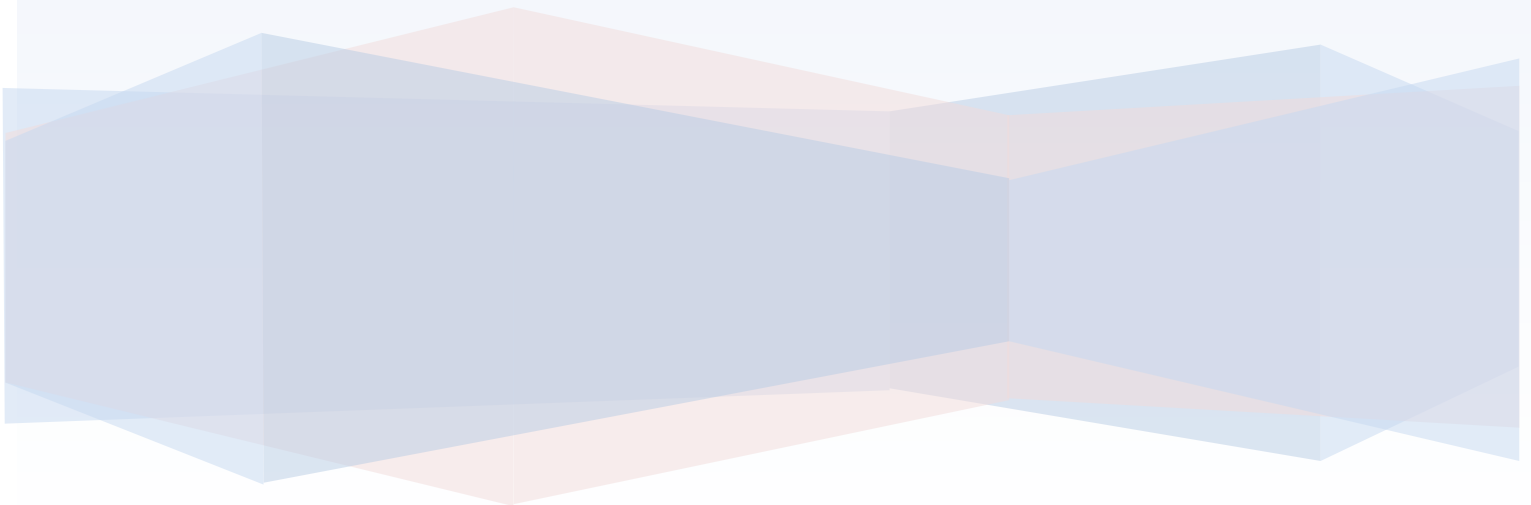


School Boards, the English Community and our Democratic Myth

Submission to the Committee on Culture and Education on Bill 40

By the Greater Montreal Forum

Note: Founded in August 2019, the Greater Montreal Forum (GMF) is a not-for-profit association dedicated to serving and supporting the minority English-speaking community (ESC) in the greater Montreal area. <https://greatermontrealforum.org/>



So often used and so little respected the principle of democracy is the iconic touchstone to which those who wield power claim legitimacy. People elect their representatives to a body, which will exercise various powers in keeping with the principles of transparency and accountability. When it comes to education, our institutions are furthermore marketed as the embodiment of our English-speaking minority rights as supported by the will of the people who look upon their elected officials as watchdogs to their collective interests. Not too long ago, a popular slogan from school boards and advocacy groups was “Do not touch our institutions”. In fact, institutional interests somehow became English rights because it was the will of our people. What a myth, what a lie, what a terrible fabrication.

If anything, our institutions have often become the very violators of our community’s collective interest. Anyone who has ever dealt with school boards in Montreal can tell you a far different story than the ones articulated by our community leaders. Simply put, we contend that our community leadership is detached from the masses it claims to serve and has pursued policies and practices that make them unaccountable, non-transparent, elitist and above all, contemptuous and dismissive of dissenting opinion. Furthermore, by assuming this mantle of legitimacy, it peddles policies more akin to political agendas and minority rights grandstanding.

From where does this self-appointed legitimacy stem from?

It begins with the election process. For school boards, in particular, elections are held to choose school commissioners. One could argue that the commissioners represent the will of the people. But that would be missing the greater picture of how such elections are run. To begin with, our English-speaking community has an issue with its definition. Who is this electoral base that commissioners seek to represent? Is it those anglos who have a certificate of eligibility allowing their children to attend or is it a broader interpretation of anyone who identifies with the community? With turnouts at election time so low, registering a few extra “anglos” can have a tremendous impact on who gets elected.

Who are the candidates and what do they stand for and how can you know? Presumably, there are debates. We have been to plenty only to discover that nobody shows up, at times, not even the candidates.

Ultimately what legitimacy does 17 percent participation bring? This last figure was only achieved under persistent pressure from community spokespersons warning that if people did not go out to vote the community could lose its school board. About 83 percent did not bother or chose not to vote. You would not know it with all the fuss the QCGN, QESBA, and APPELE are making about democracy and its virtues.

And what of this spirit of democracy in meetings held by the boards? How respected are the parents or members of the general public who bother to show up to ask questions only to be regularly intimidated and dismissed? How respected is democracy when tax-paying citizens are banned from asking questions, when the media often needs to use access to information legal provisions to get information that ought to be open and transparent?

And what furthermore can we say about the spirit of democracy as exemplified by one particular board, the EMSB, who showed disdain and utter contempt for the parents of former Saint Patrick’s Elementary school during its consultation process. What does it tell you when demolition crews had already begun gutting that school before the consultation process even took place? And instead of rectifying their terrible error in judgement, the board doubles down and forces parents to seek a legal injunction to prevent an illegal action from taking place. So

the parents who pay taxes need to raise private money to take “their” institution to court and will face lawyers paid for by the EMSB who will grind them down.

St. Patrick’s parents won several court challenges even when they could no longer pay for legal services and had to represent themselves. That should give us pause to question how such a situation could have been allowed to happen and what it means to our democracy when institutions are fighting the very citizens that fund them, and that legitimizes them through the electoral process and to whom they are expected to render services.

Would it not be time to consider the appointment of an ombudsman who would be mandated with representing the interest of the public by investigating and addressing complaints of maladministration or a violation of rights? We would like to add our voice of support for the recommendation made in 2017 by the Quebec Ombudsman who argues that the process for handling complaints within the educational system must be reviewed and that their office should be so mandated.

For justice to exist, it must function in an effective way where complaints need to be addressed quickly and effectively. As indicated above, it is unfair to place the burden on parents and citizens to go to court to have their rights respected not only for the costs involved but also for the time, which will be lost litigating and getting a judgement. It is this hopelessness when it comes to the amount of time lost at public meetings, which in our opinion is the greatest contributing factor as to why the public does not get involved.

Our testimony will speak to that frustration both in the context of the recent school transfers that occurred at EMSB as well as the consistent stonewalling which occurs at the Lester B Pearson Board.

We also welcome Bill 40’s commitment to improving not only the rules of governance but also its desire to articulate a more stringent code of ethics for the new educational service centers.

Note: our working group that has prepared this submission has adopted it unanimously. This committee includes: Giuliano D’Andrea, Chris Eustace, Brian Grindrod, and Richard Smith.

Supplemental

Submission to the National Assembly Committee on Culture and Education hearings related to Bill 40

By Brian Grindrod
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Greater Montreal Forum

Power attracts the worst and corrupts the best. This quote attributed to American author, Edward Abbey, mirrors the reality of school boards in Quebec. Consider, in particular, the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) with its long list of unethical transgressions, toxic culture, and sense of self-entitlement.

The power struggles and petty politics make a mockery of our democracy and more importantly, taxpayers' money that is used not for the benefit of our society but against it. The EMSB has once more recklessly squandered its monetary resources at its disposition to polarize and divide Quebecers by escalating conflict with a democratically elected National Assembly which 74 of its 125 members from the CAQ were voted to represent Quebecers.

One of the reasons for the current majority government of the National Assembly was the declaration to reform archaic school boards in order to make our academic institutions efficient and accountable.

Another reason was to separate religion from state. The replacement of confessional school boards by linguistic ones initiated in 2000 was the logical and natural step from the Quebec government of 1981 to restrict access of the clergy into our schools. In 2018, our society mandated the government that religious symbols adorning the clothing by figures of authority and representatives of the Quebec government cease and desist with the implementation of Law 21, which also applies to those who serve the people in our public schools. The EMSB is using Quebec taxpayers' money to combat the people who were elected to reform school boards and separate religion from state. This clearly indicates the continuous unethical transgressions, petty politics and sense of self-entitlement by the EMSB, who believe itself above the law and is unaccountable.

Using the cliché that they have been democratically voted to serve the interests of our citizens, parents and the education of children, let us be intellectually honest and call the current state of school commissions for what they truly are. That is the modern definition of kakistocracy in which a system of government is under the authority by the worst qualified, and/or most unscrupulous citizens of our society.

I support Bill 40 and wish to see its amendments implemented to its fullest for the benefit of our society.