

GEORGE STEPHENSON

THE provincial government should concede what is obvious about its legislation to revamp the education system.

Like the parrot in the famous Monty Python skit: Bill 64 is no more. It may be perched among other pending government legislation, but it will never fly.

That became clear when Heather Stefanson declared her candidacy for Progressive Conservative party leadership and announced that if elected, she will kill the bill. Supporting her candidacy are more than half the Tory caucus, including the minister of education.

It is likely other leadership candidates will express similar regrets about the legislation. Few will want to drag that anchor through a leadership campaign and then into a provincial election. It leaves the government to ponder at least a couple of questions: What happened? And what now?

What happened is that the government took the whole show sideways to enact what it wanted rather than what research showed what was needed.

The whole process started out on a positive note. The government announced years ago it would undertake a major study of the education system. Its partners, from unions to management, were in support. A commission was appointed. It heard thousands of submissions and wrote a report with 75 recommendations aimed at improving the education of Manitoba students.

Unlike the most frequent way provinces handle such reports, the Pallister government decided to do things differently. It wrote its own report, ignoring many of the commission's recommendations. Indeed,

the commission report was pushed to the background by the government's report, with the now-ironic title BEST (Better Education Starts Today). Education Minister Cliff Cullen signed that report and has defended it, right up until his appearance at Stefanson's side.

That interpretation of the commission report then became the massive Bill 64, which Cullen also defended. All that was too late. The government had already made its critical mistake.

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Normally, when governments appoint commissions, they act on the recommendations of those commissions. They don't write their own reports and then release them at the same time. Imagine the outrage had the federal government written its own report in advance of the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report. And what if that report deviated substantially from the findings of the commission? (Rhetorical question.) The BEST report did deviate substantially from the commission report on the most publicly controversial decisions.

The commission did not recommend an educational system devoid of elected trustees. The province decided, however, to begin implementing a system that would put all decision-making powers in the hands of the provincial government, either directly or through appointments. No more elected trustees.

This and many other aspects of Bill 64 were roundly opposed. But more than the opposition, it was the total lack of support the bill had in the education community that was stunning and critical. There was nobody lined up to support the bill except for politicians

such as Cullen, whose commitment can be questioned now. Tellingly, not a single K-12 commissioner stood up for what the government was doing.

Not even the commission chairs showed up when their report and the BEST report were released. Either the government couldn't find or didn't look for allies. Hubris was its guiding light.

And so, now what?

The government no doubt knows it can't keep trying to sell a dead parrot and that it needs a replacement. It has to fulfill a debt to the thousands of Manitobans who made presentations, filled out questionnaires and wrote to the K-12 commission. This was the biggest review of the education system in decades, and its necessity doesn't end because the government decided to step off a cliff.

A massive amount of work has gone into the commission, the BEST report and Bill 64. The government could do what counterparts elsewhere have done, and simply say yes or no to each of the 75 recommendations of the K-12 commission.

Not everybody will like everything. That was to be expected. What wasn't expected was the government would ignore the commission when doing so suited its ideology and instead just do what it wanted.

None of the presenters to the commission asked for that, as those in government now realize.

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