

Brief on Bill 170

An act to reform the municipal territorial organization of the metropolitan regions of Montreal, Quebec and Outaouais

December 2000

Introduction:

Alliance Quebec welcomes the opportunity to present our concerns on Bill 170 - *An act to reform the municipal territorial organization of the metropolitan regions of Montreal, Quebec and Outaouais*. We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Quebec Liberal Party for undertaking this initiative to ensure that all Quebecers have an opportunity to publicly express their views on Bill 170. We would note that we have made an effort to be included in the hearings before the National Assembly commission studying the law and like so many others who oppose the Bill, have not been accepted to be heard.

In our view the current Government of Quebec did not run on a platform advocating municipal mergers and has held no meaningful public consultation on the issue. Indeed the same government that believes that Quebec should be able to secede from Canada on a 50% plus one vote on a nebulous question is now refusing to respect the over 95% votes against forced mergers held in many Quebec municipalities such as Montreal West, Hampstead, Westmount, Baie d'Urfe and Anjou.

The PQ government's intention to impose mergers on municipalities where mayors, councillors and residents have openly and publicly objected to the mergers outlined in Bill 170 is cause for great concern to all Quebecers. We must ensure that the concerns of the residents who live in affected areas are addressed, that their needs are met and that their voices are heard.

Areas of Particular Concern:

The Bernard Report suggested that local communities would survive in the Bouchard/Bourque island-wide city. This quickly dissipated with Bill 170. Rather than the quasi-municipalities that the Bernard report envisaged, the boroughs outlined in Bill 170 would be no more than districts of the City of Montreal. The smallest eight municipalities will be completely eliminated as they are merged with neighbouring towns. Years of history, community spirit and pride, volunteerism and the "village-like" atmosphere of those municipalities will disappear completely.

Under Bill 170, boroughs would be no more than districts of the City of Montreal. The limited powers that a borough would have according to the law, are limited still further by subjecting them to plans developed by the City of Montreal. This is the case when it comes to economic development or fire prevention. Moreover, the local borough has power of local parks and local roads... unless the central City decides that they are under its jurisdiction. Finally, Section 73 of the Act states that "The City Council may, by a by-law adopted by two-thirds of the votes of its members, order that it has jurisdiction in all or part of a field within the authority of the borough councils." Therefore the City of Montreal can simply remove all powers from the boroughs by a two-thirds vote.

In addition, local boroughs would have no taxation powers. Therefore they would be dependant on the City of Montreal for transfer payments to fund local services. Most likely, less money would be made available to buy more

books for suburban libraries or equipment for suburban facilities since they are now so much better equipped than those in the City of Montreal. Road repair and snow clearing services would also deteriorate. Also, since taxation is run by the City, tax bills and documentation will no longer be bilingual.

There will be a lack of local elected representatives to address residents' issues. For example, when the cities of Montreal West, Côte Saint-Luc and Hampstead are merged into one borough, the number of City Councillors will be drastically reduced from 21 to 3, and there will be no Mayor for the area.

Also of great concern is the transition committee named by the PQ minister which will have enormous powers to name all the senior bureaucrats in the city and seems to be a way for the PQ to take control of the new city without waiting for an election to take place. Over the next year elected mayors and councillors will be relegated to following orders from officials who were not elected.

With respect to bilingual services, it must be noted that the forced amalgamation of municipalities into Montreal districts will reduce if not completely eliminate bilingual status for those municipalities which currently enjoy it. The Charter of the French Language presently maintains that in order for a municipality to be eligible for bilingual status, it must have a population which is at least 50 percent non-francophone. However, the PQ government is attempting to make it even more difficult for a town or borough to acquire bilingual status by introducing a Bill to amend the Charter of the French Language so that a municipality would now have to have a population where more than 50% of the residents are mother-tongue English-speaking in order to be granted bilingual status. This will reduce the English-speaking community to its lowest possible numbers. By changing the requirements for bilingual status and gerrymandering the boundaries of districts, the PQ will manage to avoid according bilingual status to the residents of NDG, Snowdon, Cote des Neiges and Ville Marie.

Although Bill 170 has recognized that the bilingual municipalities would maintain such status as boroughs, it must be noted that the services which are presently provided by bilingual municipalities will be transferred to the City government. As a result, these services will no longer be bilingual. For example, the municipal court will be run by the City, not the borough. So, now not only will someone have to travel for an hour to contest a parking ticket, but the ticket and its instructions will no longer be provided in a bilingual format.

In addition, according to Bill 170, the boroughs will not have employees. All employees will be hired and fired by the City of Montreal. Therefore the right of bilingual municipalities to automatically require English as a job skill will not apply to any employee hired by the central City.

Conclusion:

It is clear that the residents of affected areas will pay the ultimate price for municipal mergers. Residents will be expected to pay higher taxes for a lower standard of services. Bilingual services will be lost and municipal institutions, which once offered bilingual services, will gradually erode. We urge you to seriously consider the impact of the municipal mergers on bilingual services and ultimately on the well-being of all who reside in affected areas. It is imperative our communities' needs be met if we are to continue to grow and flourish in our municipalities.

It must be reiterated that the PQ government's intention to impose mergers on municipalities where mayors, councillors and residents have openly and publicly objected to the mergers outlined in Bill 170 is cause for great concern to all Quebecers. The fact that the PQ government should choose to impose such legislation against the wishes of the people concerned clearly demonstrates the PQ government's unwillingness to recognize the democratic rights of

all Quebecers. We wish to work with the Liberal Party, mayors and councillors and indeed all Quebecers English and French speaking to oppose these mergers in every way possible. We thank you for your time and attention.

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