

Session title: Plenary presentation: From journalist to Politician: Perspectives on Civic Engagement

Moderator/Panelists: Bernard Drainville, Minister responsible for Democratic Institutions and Active Citizenship

Date and time: Monday December 9 2013, 8:45 am

Rapporteur: Simon Bérubé

Session Summary

The Minister presented the four policy action pillars of his government, which was elected on September 4, 2012: integrity, prosperity, identity, and solidarity. Regarding integrity, he was given the mandate to work on improving Quebec's democracy, which in his view had been tainted by allegations of wrongdoing and corruption.

In recent months, legislation aiming to combat cynicism has been adopted. This legislation focuses on the public contracting process, the financing of political parties, and the introduction of fixed-date elections.

Regarding the public contracting process, the 24,000 companies that share these contracts must now demonstrate their integrity. The *Autorité des marchés financiers* (financial markets authority), acting upon a recommendation from the *Unité permanente anticorruption* (anti-corruption unit), must approve a company's right to bid on public contracts.

In Quebec, only individual voters can make financial contributions to political parties. In order to put an end to the so-called "straw man" scheme, the maximum amount for individual contributions was lowered in recent years from \$3,000 to \$1,000, then to \$100. During an election year, a person can make an additional \$100 donation to the party of his or her choice. Political organizations now have access to increased public funding; the cost of providing this funding has been offset by the abolition of the income tax credit for contributors. Finally, a bill introducing fixed-date elections has been adopted. According to the Minister, the previous situation gave the party in power an advantage, which added to the cynicism of the general public.

What's more, a new Election Act enables young people to vote at their academic institution. The purpose of this measure is to increase turnout among voters in the 18-24 age group, whose turnout was 62% during the September 2012 election, compared to 75% among the population at large.

The Minister pointed out that the three bills discussed above were adopted unanimously by Members of the National Assembly of Quebec.

In the short and medium term, Mr. Drainville intends on examining lobbying regulation. In his view, lobbying activities, while healthy, must take place in a transparent manner, and it is only normal for citizens to aware of the nature of these activities.

Quebec's first access to information act was adopted in 1982. It targets both access to information and the protection of personal information. From an accountability perspective, the Minister intends on ensuring that access to information is facilitated. For this purpose, a register of public contracts awarded in Quebec was posted online by the government. In the same vein, it is now possible to file a public access-to-information application online. The response by the relevant government organization will also be posted on the net.

Finally, in the context of the debate on the Quebec Charter of Values, the Minister explained that a process was launched to consult the population on the internet before the bill was tabled, at a time when only the legislation's broad strokes had been disclosed. According to government data, a total of 160,000 people visited the site and 25,000 people provided comments.