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Who will protect us?

The Holt government cultivates the approval and hope of civil society and the public by revoking some of the regressive measures of its predecessor, adopting a more transparent approach to its communications and speaking out firmly against tariff threats.

But we must not let our guard down.

On March 19, Minister Jean-Claude D'Amours tabled a bill amending the Degree Granting Act. The purpose of this amendment is to accelerate the approval of training programs proposed by private companies and conferring degrees (bachelor's, master's, doctorate).

This change is far from insignificant. It promotes the privatization of post-secondary education and weakens protection for the public in general and young people in particular.

The current lengthy and involved process for evaluating degree programs is designed to ensure that institutions have sufficient financial and human resources to provide quality training that meets agreed standards, including governance with faculty participation, and respect for academic freedom. In this way, students are assured that they will be able to complete the program and that it will be recognized by other educational institutions and professional associations. This four-stage evaluation, including the one carried out by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, guarantees the competence of our doctors, nurses, lawyers and others.

The proposed amendment will make it possible to short-circuit the requirement for a rigorous evaluation and give the Minister alone the power to authorize the advertising and recruitment of new training programs before they have gone through the usual rigorous evaluation stages.

Making the evaluation process more flexible is detrimental to public universities. Public universities offer a broad range of courses; they don't just respond to the immediate needs of the market by generating private profits, they prepare students to think and adapt to a complex and changing future. Unlike universities, which provide a range of programs that are useful to society, private companies confine themselves to teaching, and then only in one or two profitable areas, using guest lecturers rather than permanent teaching staff. They do not conduct research or provide services to the community. The privatization of higher education is comparable to the privatization of health care. If the private sector can claim to be efficient, it is because it takes the easy niches and leaves everything else to the public sector.

Why the change at this point? Can the shortage of nurses justify the approval of the 3-year rather than the four-year, partly online program of Maine's Beal? Can it justify lowering competency standards for all degrees?

The Holt government is taking advantage of the weakness of the opposition. Who is going to ask these questions? Not the Conservatives, since it was they who first suggested funding the nursing program at Beal in Maine. The Greens, whose speaking time in the House has been reduced?

Strong majority governments are not always a good thing.

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