

The environment : scapegoat of the economy

Opinion piece of Genevieve Paul, executive director of the Québec environmental law centre (CQDE) published in [La Presse](#), on October 7 2020.

Contrary to the government's assertions, it is clear that Bill 66 proposes a lowering of environmental requirements and restricts opportunities for public participation.

Bill 66 proposes to expedite impact assessments for high-risk environmental projects and exempt moderate-risk projects from the need for ministerial authorization. In addition, it restricts the information available to the public on the projects in question, such as regarding contaminants released into their living environments. Finally, it limits the opportunities for the public to participate in decision making for projects with high environmental risks. In the case of the work planned for Autoroute 30 and Route 117, it is suggested that these projects be exempt from the environmental impact assessment and review procedure and from the obligation to obtain government authorization.

This comes just a few weeks after the government relaxed the requirements of the environmental authorization process, without taking into account the cumulative or climatic impacts of the thousands of projects proposed each year throughout Quebec.

SHORT-CIRCUITED PROCESSES AND LOWERED STANDARDS

Indeed, Quebec has just adopted a new authorization process that will take full effect on December 31. Just before the introduction of Bill 66, the Minister of the Environment lauded this new regulatory process for its ability to "significantly reduce the time required to authorize low or negligible risk projects." However, this same government now considers it insufficient before it has even tested its effectiveness.

Let's be clear: we need schools and seniors' homes.

We need a recovery that will leave no one behind and that will minimize the deleterious effects of the current health crisis. That this can be done by bypassing public participation processes and eliminating environmental requirements is a much riskier proposition indeed!

On the other hand, at first glance, most seniors' housing or school construction projects present low or negligible environmental risks and would not require ministerial authorization. Why then present the amputation of environmental requirements and public participation processes as necessary for their implementation? It appears that the real intent of Bill 66 is to cut corners on infrastructure projects with high environmental risks.

A DANGEROUS SLIPPERY SLOPE

Weakening our environmental criteria even more is to risk further compromising our biodiversity at a time when scientific experts are imploring us to act to protect biodiversity and therefore to stave off pandemics. Wishing to revive the economy that has been battered by COVID-19 by cutting corners on the environment is like trying to cure the sick with what made them ill in the first place. Why not, for example, instead establish teams dedicated to authorizations and environmental assessments that would focus only on clearly identified priority projects?

With all due respect to the Minister responsible for Government Administration, Sonia LeBel, we cannot describe the approach put forward by Bill 66 as "innovative." To innovate is to introduce something new to replace something old. The idea that environmental protection is an obstacle to economic development is a thing of the past.

Together, let's innovate by ceasing to oppose economy and ecology and by recognizing that environmental protection is not our enemy. On the contrary, it is among our best weapons to ensure the well-being of Quebec society, today and tomorrow, and to implement the green, just, and truly sustainable transition we need.

You say it's time to "move forward." We agree. And that can only be done by recognizing the intrinsic value of nature and maintaining high standards for its protection.