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Advocacy Matters: Governance under Assault

Saturday, October 23, 2021

Advocacy Matters is a new feature of the Weekly Bulletin. At least once a month, the MRFA Advocacy Committee will share a short article that focuses on a PSE advocacy-related issue. This fall, installments are focusing especially on the Alberta government's plan for transforming PSE: Alberta 2030.

The [September 27 installment](#) of *Advocacy Matters* presented a brief overview of the provincial government's *Alberta 2030* project to thoroughly transform public post-secondary education in Alberta (a [slightly longer article](#) is also available). This installment focuses in on one of AB 2030's many interlocking components: the plan to transform the current model of shared university governance (also known as collegial governance) such that elements within the private sector gain outsized influence over institutional and system priorities.

With the fall session of the Alberta Legislature beginning today (October 25) and many political watchers expecting significant governance-related amendments to Alberta's *Post-Secondary Learning Act*, we can turn to existing government documents and a recently released analysis of AB 2030 to let us know what we likely need to organize to resist—that is, if we truly believe that narrow private interests ought not to dominate public education.

The March 2020 [Request for Proposals](#) for a consultant (ultimately selected as McKinsey & Company) to assist with developing the AB 2030 plan makes clear the kind of new PSE governance model Jason Kenney's UCP government already had in mind. An enhanced role for industry within system governance is a main theme: Industry is to partner with government in determining policy directions in line with the government's overall economic plans for the province; institutions are to be held accountable according to new funding mechanisms. Specifically, the RFP describes the aim for a new model of public governance in which private sector actors like McKinsey & Company (or networks of actors) engage in "high trust strategic alliances and guiding coalitions" to "bring about transformations" through "co-creation" with government. Echoing the claims of the 2019 MacKinnon report that laid out the government's roadmap for its key public policy initiatives, the RFP asserted that Alberta's post-secondary system currently lacks sufficient direction and therefore that change—in terms of governance but ultimately cultural change—is required to realign PSE priorities with economic policy objectives favourable to industry and endorsed by government.

The October 5, 2021 Parkland Institute report, [Roadmap or Roadkill, A Critical Look at the Government's Strategy for Post-Secondary Education in Alberta](#), provides a comprehensive analysis of the AB 2030 project, including of emerging details of the plan for transforming our model of shared governance. Although readers are urged to

familiarize themselves with the entire report, especially pressing in today's legislative context is Chapter 8 ("Corporatist Governance under Alberta 2030"). As authors Trevor Harrison and Richard Mueller note:

In a word, issues of governance detail the accountability of post-secondary institutions to Albertans. In this context, Alberta 2030's changes to governance are radical and potentially dangerous for the province and its citizens. The fact that the government has foreshadowed changes to the PSLA in the fall legislative sitting doubly highlights the importance of this issue.

Analyzing the available government material, while noting that the full McKinsey & Company Alberta 2030 report has never been made available to the public despite having cost the Alberta public \$3.7M, Harrison and Mueller describe the picture of the new model that is emerging:

- The collapse of the current six-sector model down to two, the first involving universities and the second involving colleges and technical institutes;
- The creation of a Minister's *Strategic Advisory Council* to be populated by representatives of industry and employers, handpicked members of the public, and "experts" from outside Alberta not affiliated with the province's educational institutions, who will recommend allocation of incentive funding according to government-identified priorities and advise the Minister on operating grant allocations and performance-based funding metrics;
- The creation of per-sector (i.e., two) *coordinating committees*, made up of institution representatives, responsible for facilitating implementation of Strategic Advisory Council-determined, Ministry-endorsed plans.

Overall government priorities for PSE are already known to be centered on alignment of institutions' programs with labour market demands and on research that has perceived commercialization potential. Within the new framework of performance based-funding and investment management agreements, which has already been set up through recent changes to the PSLA and is now ready to be set in motion in earnest, PSE will be further constrained and shaped in the service of private interests. The combination of a new governance model and new funding framework, all in the context of shrinking public funding overall, will effectively limit institutional autonomy. This will be felt both at the board of governors (but perhaps without much objection given that public board appointments were terminated across the system to install government-friendly members in summer 2019) and at general faculties council, despite any responsibility the latter may nominally retain for overseeing academic affairs.

Considered fully, the above represents a well-planned, concerted assault on shared governance that is likely to facilitate a significant reshaping of universities and colleges in Alberta. For a more positive view of truly shared governance of a PSE system intended to serve our *many* publics while respecting academic freedom, readers should consult the Canadian Association of University Teachers [*Policy Statement on Governance*](#).

Working collectively to develop a shared understanding of the danger and a shared vision for a more positive alternative is vital. Faculty and their allies are also encouraged to think about how we build the collective capacity to actually effect change.

If you have ideas about advocacy-related topics that you'd like to see us dig into, including issues related to the Alberta 2030 initiative, please don't hesitate to contact the Advocacy Committee via facultyrelations@mrfa.net.