

The Legault Government Needs to Learn Lessons of the Past

The Legault government recently announced two massive construction and renovation projects: a \$1 billion call for tenders for an expedited 30-dwelling construction project for the elderly and a \$1.7 billion budget for projects to modernize Quebec schools.

Shall we suppose that these projects, which are intended to ensure the safety and well-being of our senior citizens and children, will be designed following a lowest-cost approach similar to the one that guided construction of the Champlain Bridge in 1957? This will not be the case today, but it appears that the government has maintained this mindset in 2019.

One year ago, on June 27, 2018, the former government proposed a review of the method for granting public architecture and engineering services contracts for Quebec's two largest public-sector buyers: the Ministère des Transports and the Société québécoise des infrastructures.

The proposal has raised serious concerns, as all the new methods it offers invariably lead to favouring the lowest bidder.

The former minister in charge, Robert Poëti, was aware of the problem and withdrew the regulatory initiative in August 2018. He set up a task force comprised of senior officials from the Conseil du trésor, public sector buyers, and industry representatives in order to review contract award methods.

The task force continued its work after the October 2018 general elections, but no meetings have been held since December 6, 2018.

Worrisome delays

Since then, a [study by independent experts](#) has confirmed that the quality-price method proposed by the government more or less systematically favours the lowest bidder. Unfortunately, the study did not succeed in resuscitating the task force, nor did it elicit any reaction from government bigwigs, although it should be a matter of concern for the current minister in charge, Christian Dubé.

The Conseil du trésor has limited recent action on this matter to selecting an accounting firm to evaluate the "perception" of some industry stakeholders on the proposed award methods. It by no means involves the safety, quality or lasting nature of infrastructures, which are closely tied to their design.

The most eloquent example is that of the old Champlain Bridge, which must soon be dismantled after a short life and countless repair works, with the knowledge that the poor decisions that led to its construction were directly guided by a search for the lowest price. We know now that out of the 29 variations studied at the time, the successful bid was quite simply the cheapest, the one that led to the dreadful result we know today.

We wish to emphasize the importance of basing the selection of professionals on quality rather than the lowest price. The benefits are manifold: better planning with accounting for sustainable development, incentives to innovate, compliance with the most rigorous timetables and budgets, and fewer disputes. Architecture and engineering projects entrusted to the lowest bidder are incompatible with the optimization of design and lifespan.

Now that significant projects are underway, it is important that we learn the lessons of the past and demonstrate vision. Can we once and for all set aside methods that favour the lowest bidder so that we may ensure quality infrastructures for current and future generations?

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