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# Strategic planning at the National Assembly of Québec

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by Jacques Gagnon

*The new public management philosophy has played a preponderant role in the public sector for over twenty years. However, the idea that certain of its management principles, such as planning and results measurement, may apply to a parliamentary institution might evoke a certain amount of scepticism. Does not the difficulty in defining products and measuring results make any attempt at planning and assessing performance extremely difficult, not to say impossible? The administrative sector of the National Assembly is currently conducting a third multi-year strategic planning exercise. This article will state the arguments for a parliamentary institution strategic plan. Secondly, the stages in the preparation of such planning will be set out. In particular, focus will be placed on the ideas submitted by various groups and the pivotal role of senior management in selecting the planning outline. Lastly, an overview of the issues and orientations that will mark the coming years will be examined.*

All public or private organizations that opt for strategic planning do so for the purpose of making their administration more efficient and cost effective. In Québec, one of the objects of the *Public Administration Act*<sup>1</sup> is specifically to promote the use of tools that improve the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the government administration. Among these tools are multi-year strategic planning and the periodical accountability report stemming therefrom. Despite it not being subject to the obligations of the *Public Administration Act*, since the parliamentary body is independent of the executive power, the National Assembly deemed it desirable that it apply certain aspects of the Act. Incidentally, it should be noted that the administrative sector of the National Assembly presents the same basic characteristics as any public administration. Even if certain services are specific to the parliamentary institution, a group of resources are managed for the purpose of carrying out a mission linked to the public service. The very size of the administrative sector, over 600 positions, calls for modern management.

The National Assembly is not the only parliamentary institution to have opted for strategic planning. At least two other Canadian provinces as well as the House of Commons of the Canadian Parliament have a multi-year strategic plan. Elsewhere in the world, among the Westminster-type parliaments, five other interesting examples have been found: the British House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament, the New Zealand Parliament, the Queensland Parliament and the Legislative Council of Western Australia.

## The Strategic Planning Exercise

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The second strategic plan of the National Assembly administration came to its conclusion at the end of the 2008-2009<sup>2</sup> fiscal year. Hence, the new plan is currently in progress and will revolve around three essential qualities. First, it must be useful, that is, it must clearly indicate the changes the organization intends to make and it must give an orientation to the action plans of the various units that make up the administration of the National Assembly. It is in these action plans, which are by definition more detailed and which cover the organization's current activities, that all individuals may measure their contribution to the success of the mission. The strategic plan must also be credible. In this regard, certain relatively common

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pitfalls in this type of exercise are to be avoided: excessive complexity, inaccessible language, unlimited quantification and useless details. Lastly, a good plan must be challenging, but realistic. The best-laid plan may be far-fetched. Focus should be placed on that which is important and which is possible.

Four major stages constitute the critical part of the planning exercise. During the first phase, at the National Assembly, consideration was given to the basic elements, that is, the organization's mission, its values, the external and internal context and issues stemming therefrom. This first stage mobilized management personnel overall in various joint working group meetings.

In this regard, the mission of the administration must be developed in relation with the larger mission of the parliamentary institution. Thus, all current administrative sector activities must contribute to supporting the Members in their fundamental roles as legislators, controllers of the government action and representatives of the population.

A second stage concerned the orientations and objectives, which can rightly be considered as the framework of the strategic plan. It was essential at this point for senior management to make known the orientations that would be prioritized. A preliminary draft was therefore submitted for discussion. This time, management personnel was called upon to contribute, but within each of the three major areas of activity. This method relies on the participation of the individuals who are directly concerned by each of the orientations to define major objectives.

Following this brainstorming exercise, the final and detailed content of the strategic plan was established and approved by senior management. Moreover, it is at this stage that the results indicators and the targets to be attained were added to each of the strategic objectives. The political authorities of the National Assembly – the Chair and the Office of the Assembly – will give final approval to the project.

A final phase consists, for each of the organization's branches, in finalizing an annual action plan to give effect to the strategic planning. At this time, the personnel overall is called upon to take part in preparing these plans.

An important aspect concerns the junction between the strategic planning and the major institutional projects. Involving various sectors, these projects have major repercussions on the use of resources and the organization of work (redesigning of the Internet site, integrated resource management system, sustainable

development plan, public communications master plan, etc.). They also have long-term implications for the organization. Correspondingly, they must be taken into consideration in the strategic planning.

The strategic planning approach adopted by the administration of the National Assembly relies on the constant commitment of senior management and on regular and adapted mechanisms in the consultation of individuals to give effect to the strategic orientations. The drafting of the plan is strongly influenced by the comments and suggestions made throughout the process. Furthermore, guides put at the disposal of Québec's ministries and agencies as well as the plans they established are a useful source of inspiration.

### **The Context, Issues and Strategic Orientations**

The analysis of the context in which the administration of the National Assembly evolves particularly focussed on the evolution of a group of factors presenting special challenges as regards the management of the institution. For example, changes in the needs of Members, technological changes and the global labour market situation were taken into consideration.

The four major issues that arise from this analysis create an equal amount of challenges for the organization. The success of the strategic plan will be measured by the quality and efficiency of the actions that will be taken to meet these challenges.

#### *A response that is adapted to the changing needs of Members*

Since support to Members is at the heart of the mission of the administration of the National Assembly, a response that is adapted to their changing needs without a doubt constitutes the most crucial challenge for the 2009-2012 planning period. Changes affecting the work of Members, whether regarding content or work procedures, require that the administration constantly adapt services to adequately meet the needs and requests that are expressed. Beyond these services, certain of the administration's work procedures must also be modified.

#### *Reinforcement of communications with citizens*

One of the challenges in this field consists in reaching, perhaps through new tools or through a particular approach, certain priority clientele, for example young people. Another challenge remains, namely to coordinate the numerous efforts and activities that contribute to the outreach of the institution and the efficiency of its messages. This outreach also encompasses an important historical and heritage component. The Assembly takes on an essential role in

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research, conservation, promotion and dissemination of the history of the institution, the parliamentarians and its real estate and property.

#### *Cost-effective management of the organization*

As regards human resources, the administration of the National Assembly must dispose of personnel that is competent and highly committed to attaining the objectives of the organization. In concrete terms, the immediate challenge is to face the retirement of a large number of experienced employees and to ensure efficient knowledge transfer. The challenge is particularly important since attracting and retaining personnel in this day and age are more difficult to achieve. Furthermore, in a period when financial and human resources are limited and when the administration must adapt its services to the context and needs, it is essential that the quest for cost-effectiveness be constant. Lastly, following the example of Québec's public administration, the organization's overall management must take into account the principles of sustainable development.

#### *Optimum use of information and communication technologies*

One of the major challenges consists in having a comprehensive view of the evolution of technologies and integrating them to the work procedures to obtain the most benefit therefrom. The management of technological projects must also take into account constraints linked to the resources available. Finally, these projects give rise to significant modifications in work procedures, modifications that cannot take place without paying special attention to the management of change.

It should be noted that these four challenges are part of the continuity of the previous strategic plan. This is not really surprising. Certain aspects of the context have of course changed, but the fundamental elements are still present.

It is also interesting to observe the great similarities between the strategic planning of parliaments that we have examined. Obviously, their common mission partly explains this convergence. Additionally, the political, social, technological and administrative context, while often comprising local specifications, is not that different from one Parliament to another. As an example, information and communication technologies broadcasting is a worldwide phenomenon. All Parliaments face the need to establish closer relations with the population to increase comprehension regarding democratic institutions and to extend citizen participation. Several public administrations worldwide also are faced with a human resources

management problem that will worsen over the coming years.

To meet these challenges the administration of the National Assembly will focus on three major orientations during the next three years:

- Adapt, on an on-going basis, the work procedures and services to meet the ever-changing needs in relation to parliamentary work;
- Bring the National Assembly and its Members closer to the citizens;
- Meet management challenges.

These orientations will subsequently include results objectives and indicators that will enable the organization to measure progress and report accountability, the final stage of the planning cycle.

#### **Conclusion**

Even though the exercise is demanding and that it occasionally raises criticism, it is highly useful for an organization to take a long, hard look at its current situation and its outlook. In an ever-changing environment, it does not suffice to do today exactly what was done yesterday. A pause and strategic thinking enable an organization to refocus its attention on its mission – its rationale – and to establish the essential measures to take in order to carry it out more adequately. The exercise is also useful when an organization wants to share with its human resources a vision of what it wants to achieve in the long run.

The administration of a Parliament is not very different from that of any other organization. It obviously has certain distinctive characteristics and must act within a context that is unique thereto. However, it carries out a mission, serves clients and is supported by partners, holds essential activities and proposes well-defined products and services. It especially has, as does any other institution, the obligation to maintain and increase its performance. These are the considerations that currently guide the administration of the National Assembly in preparing its 2009-2012 strategic plan.

#### **Notes**

1. The *Public Administration Act*, adopted in 2000, establishes a results-based management framework for the ministries and agencies of the government administration.
2. Assemblée nationale du Québec. *Plan stratégique de l'administration de l'Assemblée nationale : 2004-2009*, 2004, 40 p. <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/fra/Assemblee/orientations.pdf>; the former plan covered the years 2002 to 2004.