

Thank you for affording to me and so many others the opportunity to comment on Bill 75.

There are so many things one wants to say about this Bill, that it is difficult to decide where to begin or exactly which points to include, and which to leave for others to make.

At the same time I am old enough and wise enough to realize that I might as well spend my time singing "Mary Had A Little Lamb" for all the difference it will make to the outcome. That is actually a tempting option. It would certainly be a suitable means of punishing the government members of the committee for their part in enabling this Bill. However out of deference and appreciation to the sensibilities of the opposition members, I will take a more conventional approach, and share with all of you some of my thoughts on this despicable act of the Premier and his government.

The premier likes to repeat that imposing a contract on teachers is necessary because three times he has reached an agreement with the NSTU, and three times it has been rejected by the union membership, each time with a louder "No!" At this point, he says, he sees no other path to an agreement. Yet it is significant that prior to this, Nova Scotia Teachers had never rejected even a single tentative agreement arrived at under the TCBA. It is unprecedented. The Premier does not appear to be an introspective person. He does not seem to have spent any time asking himself why that might be so. I will try to help the Committee understand.

I will leave aside the obvious points that until the membership votes to accept, he has not in fact "reached an agreement with the NSTU." Nor does imposing a contract through this legislation actually accomplish his stated goal of "reaching an agreement".

But the real problem is either that the premier does not understand the concept of collective bargaining, or if he does understand he decided from the beginning that it is not for him. The sad fact is that the normal process envisioned within the Teachers Collective Bargaining Act (TCBA) for reaching an agreement between the province and teachers – free, fair, good faith collective bargaining – has never occurred in the whole sorry episode that has constituted so-called "negotiations" over the past 15 months.

Let's review.

The "negotiations" have consisted of secret meetings; threats of punitive legislation; actual legislation in the form of Bill 148; inaccurate and inflammatory misrepresentations of NSTU positions by the Premier and Minister of Education; conciliation meetings during which the government stubbornly refused to alter its position on any of the key issues or be conciliatory in any way; refusal to engage in mediation; repeated public declarations by the premier that he would never agree to binding arbitration; students locked out of schools by government; an absurd one day session of the legislature, which met only to pass two motions to recess and one motion to adjourn; actually contemplating an "emergency" convening of the legislature in the middle of a blizzard, when there was no emergency, to gratify Stephen McNeil's monomaniacal determination to have his own way and impose his own version of a contract, while completely refusing to come to grips with any of the substantive issues raised by teachers at the table. This is not collective bargaining. It is systematic negation of a process which, if entered into with serious intent, would have provided a "path forward" for the premier. Instead he deliberately chose to abandon dialogue in favour of intransigence, confrontation, bullying and obfuscation of the issues. And that is what has brought us to this point.

And what will be the legacy of this Bill? Failure to address the many classroom issues that have driven

teachers to unprecedented acts of defiance in a massive cry for leadership and partnership. Students left to struggle in a school system rendered nearly dysfunctional by systemic problems that the government refuses to acknowledge or ameliorate. Teachers discouraged, teachers burned out, good teachers leaving the profession in despair of ever seeing improvements, feeling devalued and even villified and abandoned by those who should be leading them and working with them, not against them, in seeking workable solutions. Teachers embittered against a government and political party that has shown that it knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

So I would respectfully urge all members of this committee to ask themselves whether this Bill serves the teaching profession, students and parents and the public good, as they deserve? And if it seems to you, as it does to me, that the answer is negative, please recommend – not its amendment – but its withdrawal.