

Minister GLATIGNY, TRUMP's good pupil

The education reform proposed by the Minister for Education of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB) (French-Speaking Community of Belgium), Valérie GLATIGNY (MR) [Mouvement Réformateur (Liberals)], has everything to displease Cartesian minds and has provoked a great deal of criticism in various quarters, without any revision being envisaged to date by the Minister or her colleagues in the government of this federated entity, which is responsible for French-speaking education. Yet isn't it her mission to help structure the sector and support young students (and teachers) in order to guarantee their training and their intellectual and manual development for social and professional integration that will make a useful contribution to Belgian - and European - society?

To understand the harmful effects of this reform, there's nothing like taking a concrete example and trying to explain it in a pedagogical way. Now, a favourable wind has sent us the report sent to its organising authority by an institution that finds itself in the crosshairs of the reform, the École d'Armurerie (Gunsmithing School) Léon Mignon in Liège, which threatens it, purely and simply, with disappearance, something that sets it apart from other technical and vocational schools.

A benchmark school...

The Léon Mignon School in Liège, founded in 1897 by the City of Liège, is undoubtedly a 'family jewel' at Belgian - and even European - level. For 128 years, it has preserved, passed on and disseminated armouring expertise of exceptional quality, both technical and artistic. Numerous companies, associations and ordinary Belgian and European citizens benefit from it, not forgetting of course the Belgian army, the gendarmerie and the various police forces, ensuring safe use and maintenance conditions for firearms owners. The range of skills on offer at the school is impressive: from the manufacture of a weapon from a simple piece of raw metal, to the delicate art of the highly renowned engravings on hunting weapons (an art that dates back to the 18th century), to the exploration of modern manufacturing methods in terms of engineering and design. Gunsmiths trained at the school are immediately hired, given the school's reputation, with a 97% rate of employment after graduation, whether in Belgium, Europe or the rest of the world - an exceptional rate commensurate with the high standards of the training. The viability of the other sections depends on the school's extremely popular gunsmithing section, in terms of credit hours and student numbers.

In the current context of a new economy of rearmament in Europe, given the unfortunate developments of the war in Ukraine and the logic of military disassociation and economic confrontation between the USA and the European Union, we can only be astonished at the Minister's blindness in not considering this school of true excellence, which is in great danger of being closed down outright because of an ill-prepared reform.

...integrated into the socio-economic fabric.

The School is not just a place of excellent training; it also has the particularity of being part of a vast economic system, combining defence, culture and sport: what would become of the competitiveness of FN/Browning in Herstal if it could no longer recruit students (the latest statistics indicate a recruitment rate of 15 to 20% at FN/Browning) from the local base, the quality of which is unanimously recognised in the arms industry? In terms of movable and immaterial heritage, what would the arms museums (including the Musée d'Armes de Liège, Europe's largest museum in this field, and the Musée Royal de l'Armée du Fédéral in particular) do if they could no longer take on their trainees to provide expert care for the collections or help restore and maintain the weapons of collectors of old weapons or re-enactors keen on Napoleonic marches or the two World Wars who keep the memory alive? Or the Royal Military Academy, where they broaden their skills and learn the techniques of the ballistics laboratory (responsible for testing protective devices in banks, post offices and other public places) or, of course, the Ministry of Defence? More generally, what would the gunsmiths who repair and maintain the weapons used by sports shooters and hunters (who regulate contaminated or overpopulated animal populations) do?

Once this school has disappeared, there is no other alternative in Europe - indeed, the sections at the Suhl school in Germany, the Ferlach school in Austria and the Saint-Etienne school in France have all

moved towards all-digital learning, abandoning the specific craft and versatility that is the strength of the Liège school. Then there's the USA, whose values are clearly less and less in line with those of Europeans, particularly where the use of firearms is concerned, which is increasingly uncontrolled across the Atlantic...

The planned reform

Having set the scene, let's move on to the details of the reform. The reform consists of reducing the funding allocated to the institution, resulting in fewer teaching hours and greater difficulties in recruiting and training teachers. Henceforth, students with a CESS¹ will no longer be able to enrol in the 7th year of specialisation, the very year that enables them to acquire the necessary skills, such as mastery of the various metals, mechanics, woodworking and artistic engraving.

Redirecting the 7th year to an adult education institution, as orchestrated by the reform for the other schools, is not possible in this case: such an institution simply does not exist, and even if we wanted to create it *ex nihilo*, it would not be able to obtain the rapid and automatic arms manufacturer approval required to provide such training, issued by the Ministeries of Interior and Economy. What's more, the move towards a school for adults would be linked to a reduction in the number of hours of lessons attended by the students, which would have a serious impact on the quality of the learning. Not to mention the fact that this type of education has been operating on a closed budget for years, which would mean sacrificing other essential trainings for the sole benefit of the gunsmithing section of the school.

In the end, by trying to steer the schools concerned towards adult schools, which would inevitably lead to a loss of training hours (and therefore of qualifications), it would appear that GLATIGNY, minister though she may be, and with the 'Gibbs' smile that she never ceases to display in all circumstances, is scorning vocational education, by reinforcing the stereotype of a relegation stream that still clings to certain schools in this sector.

The net loss in periods will be high, between 200 and 300 periods, corresponding to 12 to 15 full-time equivalent teachers, which will inevitably lead to the closure of entire sections and classes.

Concrete measures

What carnage! The following are currently planned:

1. closure of the 7th year metal gunsmithing and elimination of the repair specialisation requested by the gunsmiths retailers sector;
2. closure of 2 classes in the 4th year gunsmithing, 1 in the 5th year and one in the 6th year;
3. eventual closure of the construction draughtsman, computer graphics and welding sections;
4. impossibility of doubling the number of sections in October, and therefore the obligation to refuse enrolments for certain sections as of now, leading to a gradual drop in pupil numbers and the disappearance of the School;
5. impossibility of providing proper supervision for pupils moving up to the next year: it will be impossible to comply with the regulations on class size, as it will be impossible to create the number of groups needed to provide proper supervision for pupils.

And that's not all: GLATIGNY is imposing the exclusion of French students (50 out of 54 students in the Gunsmithing section, 75 to 80 for the whole establishment!) and foreign students who have not been educated in an establishment of the French-Speaking Community of Belgium, which constitutes an outright decimation: out of 28 enrolments in the Gunsmithing section, recorded at this date, in 4th year, only 7 would be kept valid! We might also wonder about the discriminatory nature of this

¹ CESS : Certificat d'Enseignement Secondaire Supérieur. This is the diploma awarded at the end of the 6th or 7th year in full-time secondary education. It provides access to higher education.

measure with regard to mobility, which is also encouraged by the European Union. Of these French nationals, 20% to 30%, depending on the year, settle in Wallonia after their course.

However, mastering knowledge and techniques requires at least 3 full years of study to reach a professional level in line with the requirements of the labour market. In addition to a significant loss of income, the imposed withdrawal of French students, who make up the majority of the Gunsmithing section, obviously calls into question the overall number of credits for all the other sections, and consequently it will result in teachers being made redundant and a reduction in teaching time for students - in short, a drastic reduction in the range and quality of courses on offer.

Certain 'administrative' aspects remain unknown: what about the recognition of pupils who were due to move up to Year 5 next year if they cannot be counted? Will non-recognised French students who repeat their year in 4th year be able to re-enrol next year? This could put a definitive stop to the ongoing training of some students, who would no longer have the opportunities offered to everyone when they enrolled.

Lastly, the credibility and very existence of this establishment are directly threatened, as students and parents are awaiting confirmation of their enrolment, and there is total uncertainty as to whether enrolments will be honoured. The school's international reputation could not survive this.

Conclusion

It is therefore urgent that this reform be suspended and that a more detailed analysis be carried out, allowing for differentiated treatment. At present, following the example of a TRUMP policy, the FWB, through Minister GLATIGNY, has set in motion a reform without any rigorous analysis having been carried out beforehand; it is proving to be irrelevant (apart from, no doubt, restoring the FWB budget to 'make it great again') and without any precautions being taken as to its effects. Is this not the same use of brutality in the denial of discussion and negotiation, the same incoherence (the FWB educates the "thoroughbreds" of professional excellence only to lead them straight to the slaughterhouse) and the same lack of vision? When will the FWB give itself the means to have the political staff to meet the challenges?