

Then and Now in Alberta's Education

by

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There was a time when the State, to speak in the vernacular, wouldn't touch education with a ten-foot pole and yet today that elected custodian of people's rights has built such a wall around that same education that a parent or the Church needs a ten-foot pole with which to vault it. While it is the purpose here to trace the constitutional development of the Catholic school question in Alberta there might be many amongst the lawyers who would dispute the choice of words in the title for as events indicate they might be inclined to argue that the trend has been not one of development nor even constitutional. But it is a source of never-ending interest to trace the change in attitude of the legislation affecting education in order to forecast the coming events which already have cast considerable shadows.

In order, however, to follow the question in Alberta it is necessary to look at the situation as it existed in the North West Territories for it was the rights that Catholics in the Territories had that dictated the rights they were to have in the newly-formed Province of Alberta. This point will be examined later but for the present a glance at the school question in the Territories should enable the listener to compare what Catholics then had and what they have today in the management and direction of the education of their children.

As previously mentioned the State once wanted no part of education. The first attempt to secularize schools met with blank refusal. Prior to 1870, the date of the formation of the Territories, the only education dispensed was in the home or at mission schools or Hudson's Bay posts. Following the first uprising of Metis the development of the new Province of Manitoba forced the half-breeds to migrate westward where they hoped to find the odd herd of buffalo still and to pursue their nomadic existence. They were cruelly disappointed, however, for buffalo hunts as far south and west as Montana yielded little else than a few scrawny beasts, themselves the victims of the white man's ubiquity.

The zeal of an Oblate missionary, however, nearly changed the course of history for it was Père André who conceived the idea of helping the despised D.Ps. from Red River to learn to meet the white civilization with a Metis culture rather than with the defeatism that had characterized and still does characterize their encounters with the whites. How he steered them from the abortive bison hunts into pastoral life and economic security, how he made of the St. Laurent colony an autonomous and progressively

governed society, how he came within an ace of winning for the Metis what they needed, defeated only by the fanaticism and spellbinding showmanship of Louis Riel, are facts that rightly belong to another chronicle. Yet no history of education in the west can pass unnoticed the school at St. Laurent.

The school founded in 1875 was no mission school but perhaps could be said to have been the first public school in the Northwest. It was built by the Metis as part of the scheme of Father André to form the colony and, in keeping with its humble beginning, it struggled in adversity during its formative years. The Metis at first “all fire and flame” were not too assiduous in the management of the school and so in 1877 the missionaries offered to take it over as a mission school which offer was accepted. The Metis almost immediately reneged and led by Moise Ouellette and Pierre Landry attempted to set it up on property closer to Ouellette’s home on the opposite bank of the South Saskatchewan. Being quite aware of their position as citizens of the new Territory they turned to the State for aid by way of a petition in 1877 for finances to support their newly proposed school. They were refused.

The State had no interest in education at that time, obviously content to leave the matter in the hands of parents or the missions or whoever wished to assume the responsibility. True, however, the Constitution¹ had made provision for schools when the Territory was formed in 1870 but only with a view to protecting minorities as and when a system of schools and school assessment was established. And when it is noted that at that time “it was rather expected that the minority in the North West Territories would be Protestant”² it is not hard to understand the breadth and fairness of such provision in the Constitution. A glance at the Constitution in this regard will illustrate clearly the laissez-faire attitude taken by the lawmakers to the question of education. The North West Territories Act of 1870 was a federal statute by which machinery of government was set up in the area newly acquired from the “Gentlemen Adventurers trading into Hudson’s Bay.” By Section 11 thereof it was provided that as soon as any system of taxation was introduced Ordinances respecting education could be passed by the territorial government but that it shall always therein be provided that the majority ratepayers could establish such schools as they saw fit and that the minority, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, could establish their Separate Schools.

However, the missions continued to carry the burden of education for a good while longer, until Frank Oliver, the redoubtable founder of the *Edmonton Bulletin*, brought down the first Education Bill which in 1884 became the first school ordinance of the Territory.

¹ The North West Territories Act, 1870.

² Weir – *The Separate School Question in Canada* – Appendix I, p. 243.

In keeping with the Constitution the Ordinance made no attempt to secularize education. Rather it strengthened the hands of those in whom education has reposed since the time of Christ – the Church and the parents. Under this Ordinance a public school district could be formed in areas, not exceeding 36 square miles, in which resided at least four families having a minimum of ten children of school age. Recognizing the possibility of fewer settlers in the area of the minority denomination (here again thinking of the Protestant minority) separate school districts could be formed out of one or several public school districts. The keystone of the system, however, was the control by the Board of Education comprising two sections, one Roman Catholic and the other Protestant. The conduct of its respective schools was solely within the jurisdiction of each section and individually they passed all the necessary regulations and prescribed the textbooks, curriculum and training and supervision of their teachers.

Here was the system of which Pius XI wrote forty-five years later when in his epochal Encyclical on Education he defines the Catholic School as one where:

“... all the teaching and the whole organization of the school, and its teachers, syllabus and textbooks in every branch, be regulated by the Christian spirit, under the direction and maternal supervision of the Church; so that Religion may be in very truth the foundation and crown of the youth’s entire training; and this in every grade of school, not only the elementary, but the intermediate and the higher institutions of learning as well.”³

When it is considered that Christianity is not a set of doctrines to be learned but a way of life to be lived it is no wonder that, in the words of Pius XI:

“Christian education takes in the whole aggregate of human life, physical and spiritual, intellectual and moral, individual, domestic and social, not with a view of reducing it in any way, but in order to elevate, regulate and perfect it in accordance with the example and teaching of Christ.”⁴

And what medium exists more suitable to the education of our youth for a Christian democracy than the school system of 1884.

Yet, tragically enough, the Roman Catholics were not equipped to take advantage of an equitable law. The new West was booming. The fanatical popularity of Riel had deprived the missionaries of their influence over the Catholic Metis at a time when these unfortunates needed most the counsel

³ Pius XI *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁴ Pius XI *op. cit.*, p. 32.

of men like Father André. The Rebellion of '85 and its aftermath of white immigration quickly swung the pendulum to a Protestant majority unsympathetic to a Catholic cause which it erroneously identified with rebellion. The few denominational schools were mission schools operating on a shoe-string and relying for support upon nomadic and non-taxpaying parishioners. It was only logical, therefore, that the trend in education would be to centralize, in the interest of a materialistic conception of efficiency, the control in the State, until in 1891 the Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council assumed control over the licensing of teachers and the appointment of inspectors.

The secularizing process continued apace until by 1893 the school curriculum, the qualification and training of teachers and the general supervision of all schools was in the hands of the Executive, to be vested subsequently (1901) in a Department of Education. Thus was laid the crumbling foundation of today's system in which we fumble pragmatically for the very truths that the Church has so zealously taught for twenty centuries. The ineffectiveness of modern education's attempt to develop the "ethical character" of our present-day schools can find its roots nowhere but in the shortsighted statism of the latter nineteenth century when educational amateurs failed to realize that a secular education is but a half-truth and that where religion is eliminated from the school program inefficiency in the development of right conduct and sound moral character is too often the result.

The Ordinance of 1892 raised a storm of protest and several petitions were received by the Federal Government praying for a disallowance of the Bill. According to Weir:⁵

"Apprehension was likewise expressed in regard to the inviolability of minority school rights in the future. Especially was objection taken to the compulsory professional training of teachers and to the prescribed texts to be used in separate schools."

The federal cabinet dodged the issue on the ground that the evidence as to grievances being suffered by the minority (which now was Catholic) was conflicting. The reaction of Catholics to the injustice screened by the ostrich-like detachment of the Dominion was aptly expressed by a federal member, Mr. Tarte, who said:

"No one had the right to deprive Catholics of the North West Territories of their Separate Schools. The Hon. Mr. Haultain... understood that pretty well. That is why he went about it in a roundabout way. He overhauled all the Ordinances relating to schools and while the New Ordinance reaffirms

⁵ Weir – *ibid.*

the rights of Catholics to Separate Schools, it makes these dependent on such conditions that they are virtually suppressed. So that Mr. Haultain has done indirectly what he could not do directly.”⁶

So complete was the secularizing process that Archbishop Taché, Bishop Grandin and Father Leduc were all of the opinion that Separate Schools had ceased to exist except in name.⁷

To the constitutional lawyer looking backward and able to view the tempest from the cool security of a library the obvious tactics back in 1892 would have been an appeal to the Courts on the evident unconstitutionality of the Ordinance. But after a costly skirmish in the Courts on the Manitoba school question there were few, if any, Catholics disposed to look up from the licking of their wounds to seek the blood of Mr. Haultain and his colleagues.

At this point an observation by way of digression should be made and it is this: The point of law involved in the Manitoba question was entirely different to that which would apply to the situation in the Territories. Assuming the Privy Council was right in the former (and in the writer’s opinion it was) the case would have no application to a contest in the Courts over the Ordinance of 1892.

However, the opportunity was not seized and a new Ordinance of 1901 completed the stranglehold on education. The patchwork skilfully put together, however, still possessed pieces that didn’t fit and the Haultain group were none too secure in their victory, being haunted by the Damocles sword of an appeal to the Courts. Hence, when the Territories were formed into the sister Provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta, the Constitutions of the respective Provinces referred to the Ordinance of 1901 in such a way that, it is argued, the rights of minorities set out in the Ordinance are the sole rights they now have under the Constitution of the Province, namely, The Alberta Act or The Saskatchewan Act, as the case may be. In other words it appears to be the opinion behind the succeeding legislative enactments that separate schools as known under the Ordinance of 1901 cannot be interfered with although public denominational schools, as for example a Roman Catholic public school, can be.

Thus, when in the interests of administrative convenience and efficiency, the Alberta Government had the temerity to amalgamate districts into large consolidations known as school divisions, the Catholic public school districts like their neighbouring non-Catholic public school districts were inclined to protest their loss of individual administrative control but overlooked the fact that their denominational rights were completely swept away. But how...!

In Alberta a public school district has a maximum area of 80 square

⁶ Weir – *ibid.* p. 242.

⁷ Weir – *ibid.* p. 65.

miles. In a sparsely settled area the support of a school within the district proved to be no easy problem and it was only a logical consequence of school administration to find the Department of Education raising its sights. The outcome was the legislative authority given in 1936 to the Minister at his discretion or on request from the majority of public school boards within the area proposed to be formed into a division, to create a division comprised of any number of districts. These divisions consist of, perhaps, 50 - 80 districts and, it is piously hoped, the gerrymandering of rich and poor districts will lead to greater economic security and administrative efficiency in the larger unit. This speaker studiously avoids further comment as it is not the purpose here to examine the pros and cons of centralization. However, the division process is proceeding apace and in fairness to the legislators it should be pointed out that it sought to protect denominational rights by the enactment of a section of The School Act which empowered the district, in a division, to demand the appointment to their district school of a teacher of the religious faith of the majority ratepayers in the district. But they overlooked the divisions' scramble to centralize, to close out the little red schoolhouse in the district, substituting therefor a large divisional school in a centre to which children are vanned every day or lodged in dormitories by the week, and no longer educated solely by a teacher of their own religious faith. Just another step in the decentralization of the home, this trend was not seriously contested until with the formation of The Alberta Catholic Education Association a serious movement is on foot to find, if possible, a way to cooperate with the Department's desire to secure the best for the child in his material development and at the same time secure for him his right to the eternal truths and their application to his everyday living.

The answer appears to be found in the words and spirit of the old North West Territories Act of 1870 – to grant to Catholics the right to run their own schools in cooperation with the State, to achieve the ideal of our age – education for a Christian democracy. In the divisional set-up this might mean a separate school division within the division which, of course, raises the old hue and cry amongst the opposition of sectarianism, and the divisive tendencies that tend to tear, a nation apart. The point was laboured in the school issues in the election campaign of 1929 in Saskatchewan when the Anderson opposition cloaked their bigotry neath the high-sounding argument that denominationalism had no place in the public schools which were the common meeting place of children of all nationalities and were the chief factor in racial assimilation and that “if the Public School, therefore, was not to lose its effectiveness as the chief instrument in the development of mutual understanding between creeds and classes and ‘national solidarity in the creation of an intelligent citizenry’ nothing should be permitted that would

in any way imperil the efficiency of this national institution.”⁸ Particularly they argued that “all taint of sectarianism be banished from the public school.”⁹

That, perhaps, is the keynote of the muddled thinking on denominational public schools. An English-speaking protestant electorate in its inherent fear of a French or Ukrainian-speaking majority sacrifices Christian education on the altar of racism. Similarly, on the other side perhaps too much emphasis is placed on a language under the guise of preserving a Christian faith with the result that their opponents are boxing racism whilst their children suffer by being carefully shepherded away from the best influence that might tend to make them better Christian citizens – the school.

But what of the fate of the separate schools which so far have been left undisturbed since 1901? Perhaps it is the studied intention of the planners of a homogeneous school system to rely on the Darwinian Law of survival of the fittest which with the unequal and inequitable distribution of corporate taxes and the consequent inability of separate schools to compete in quality is bound, in their estimation, to remove the last vestiges of sectarianism in education. Ontario already has shown the way and the recently announced recommendations of the Royal Commission in that Province are but another brick in the wall that the State has built around education.

Today the aim of the non-denominational educator is a school system on a national basis that is solely academic and scientific with no religious teaching. The pattern is traced so well in the views of these men of whom Weir, from whom I have liberally quoted, is perhaps the most outspoken. It is no longer in keeping with the modern ideas on education for parents to cling stubbornly to the right to educate their children in the footsteps of the Greatest Teacher, for it sets those children apart and operates as a dangerously divisive influence in a community. The modern educator, as trends in other provinces indicate, solemnly stands before us at Baltazar’s feast and levels a warning finger at us as we loll stupidly under the influence of a religious opiate, while he interprets the words of prophecy traced in his textbooks:

“Descartes, Rousseau, Darwin and Dewey” which translated means:

“The State hath numbered thy kingdom
Thou are weighed in the balance and found wanting
Thy children are divided and given to the teachers and the pragmatists.”

Thus, in this year of our Lord, what has been the constitutional

⁸ Weir – *ibid.*, p. 204.

⁹ Weir – *ibid.*

development of our Catholic schools? To summarize briefly: In 1870 under a federal constitution, the Territorial Government was given the power to legislate on matters educational, provided that the ratepayers could set up their schools as they saw fit. The recipient of these powers stayed in line for a few years and until 1891 Catholics had the right to their own system of education, their own qualification of teachers, choice of textbooks, setting of curriculum and management of schools. However, in abuse of its delegated powers the Territorial Government gradually muscled in until by the time Alberta entered Confederation we found ourselves unable to prescribe our own system of education, the qualification of our teachers, the textbooks and curriculum. The secularizing process is now virtually completed with the large centralization of districts into divisions whereby the last vestiges of denominational schools, namely, the separate or the Catholic public schools, will be isolated, uneconomic islands in the lush verdure of modern education's tricky morass. Today Alberta is the envy of her sister provinces for she enjoys a fine educational system. Her Government has put its full weight behind the tremendous task of bringing learning to its scattered population. If the secularization of its system has resulted from its desire to bring about a uniformity which sectarianism might prevent, it does not mean that they feel God has no place in the school. Some, there may be, who feel that God is unimportant in an academic field but others there are who are conscientiously trying to make of our system a means of creating a Christian citizenry provided the dissension and bitterness consequent upon sectarianism can be avoided.

There would appear to be no solution short of appeal to the Courts were it not for one seemingly insignificant patch of brilliance in the deepening shadows. Just as the little school of St. Laurent, four generations ago, sought to cope with a hopeless task, so today a tiny school in Alberta has pointed the way.

Twelve years ago on the outskirts of Edmonton, the one-roomed school of Dunvegan found itself floundering hopelessly in a semi-rural community struck by the depression and exploited by subversive elements. It was a dark hour in a dark chapter of Canada's history when lack of social justice tried the patience and endurance of many of her citizens and it was then that the thought came to Dunvegan's teacher that out of her teachings had to come loyalty to Canada, namely, education for citizenship. This would have been a narrow horizon to show children and indeed it would have stopped there had the school been in the hands of a neutral teacher, because democracy had no meaning for children in the economic no-man's land unless it were integrated with the Christ. For, it was not the idea of how much man suffers but how well he suffers, that counts. Hence it was but a step in that teacher's planning to come up with the idea that the child be taught to view our present so-called Christian democracy with critical eyes and strive to build

a democracy more worthy of the title “Christian.” To try and find what her children needed for successful living in a world where only poverty was known was the teacher’s challenge and the answer could only be found in Christian living. This did not mean classroom lessons in honesty or generosity or kindness in the abstract, nor did it inflict a multitude of “shalt nots” upon a soul already irritated with starvation, but rather it called for character building founded not on a vague ethical conception but rather on the rock of the eternal truths. It was expected that in a school that would build character capable of manifesting true and intelligent neighbourliness the reflection would be found in the home.

Using everything of good in the progressive techniques of education but not its philosophy – Dunvegan skilfully taught the arts and sciences integrated with the eternal truths so necessary in a complete education. Catechism was, in keeping with school law, reserved for the last half hour of the day so that in essence Caesar received what was Caesar’s.

Thus did one humble school give the lie to those educators who oppose Catholic schools as dividing the community. Rather now is it shown that the divisive and separatist factor is the non-denominational school with its lack of any lasting or enduring foundation for Christian citizenship. An humble teacher has built a better mousetrap with Caesar’s techniques and God’s truths. There is every indication that this method has interested many in the Alberta field of education to no small degree as indeed it might, for in a province that is amongst the foremost in this field it is only to be expected that it would seek to provide for its people the full rounding out of a child’s education both in the material and spiritual truths.

Here the chronicle must end. If the writer, at most but an amateur historian, has departed from historical data to analyse trends, it has been from a sincere motive designed to illustrate the significance of the cold fact.

Perhaps the emasculation of education by the pragmatists and secularists was necessary to force Catholics to a realization of their responsibilities to their children and to the democracy in which they live. If that is true what better plan exists than the Encyclical of Pius XI and what better motto for school children than the quiet prayer of the children at Dunvegan as the poignant words of Kipling pour from their lips:

“Teach us to look on all our ends on Thee for judge and not our friends –

That we, with Thee, may walk uncowed by fear or favour of the crowd.

Teach us the strength that cannot seek by deed or thought to hurt the weak

That under Thee we may possess Man’s strength to comfort Man’s distress.”