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Issues in Urban Education

Written by a man who has been for some years in the centre of the unusual and dramatic pressures that have been at work on the foundations of social, political and educational institutions in Quebec, this account offers a picture in action of several of the issues that are the subject of a more theoretical treatment elsewhere in this Journal. Robert Lavery considers the financial and socio-political developments among the school boards of the City of Montreal that are changing the administrator's role in the system, against a background of increasing drop-out rates and a disturbing sense of discontent with its pedagogical effectiveness.

From where I sit, the issues in urban education appear to fall under four main headings: financial, socio-political, administrative and pedagogical, in that order. These are not, obviously, independent from each other, and in our situation in Montreal they are all problems which the provincial government is well aware of and has been trying in one way or another to solve. Before highlighting each of these briefly, I would like to point out that one of the most acute problems of urban school systems is, of course, the decline in student population. However, rather than identify this as a discrete issue in itself, I would prefer to point out under each of the major headings how this population decline redefines or aggravates each of the major issues identified.

First, the financial question, which could also be labelled the economic issue. It has become apparent, although it is seldom explicitly stated, that the proportion of GNP and personal income spent on education in Quebec is high compared to the proportion spent in other provinces, at the cost of other public goods the public demand for which is getting to be as high as the assumed public demand for education¹.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of funds for various services and their recent evolution.

1. Expenditures on education, as a proportion of personal income, in 1973 were 11.7% in the Atlantic Provinces, 12% in Quebec, 9% in Ontario, and 10% in the West (*Montreal Star*, Sept. 8, 1976).

Table 1

NET EXPENDITURES OF THE QUEBEC GOVERNMENT BY CATEGORY BETWEEN 1945 AND 1969 ²						
Category	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965	1969
Administration	7.8	7.1	4.9	3.5	3.0	3.8
Protection	6.0	4.5	4.1	5.2	3.9	3.5
Transport and Communication	20.2	29.3	27.0	25.8	17.3	9.4
Health	11.4	15.8	18.3	12.8	17.3	24.6
Welfare	8.2	8.1	5.9	12.5	10.9	14.1
Recreation and Culture	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.8	0.4	1.1
Education	15.1	20.4	21.2	22.8	27.4	28.7
Natural Resources	15.5	5.9	10.4	9.9	5.5	4.3
Commerce and Industry	—	—	—	0.8	1.1	0.7
Debit	15.7	8.8	6.8	3.9	5.3	4.2
Others	—	—	1.2	2.0	7.9	4.9
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Since nearly half of the province's population lives in the Montreal megalopolis, the effort to control this burden weighs heaviest on the city. Thus even what appear to be minor per capita or per school adjustments in expenditures in the large urban boards translate into millions of dollars and affect the proportion of GNP that is devoted to the various public services. For this reason especially, it is difficult for senior governments to leave local governments completely free to fix their expenditures.

The net effect has been the centralization of certain decision-making powers either in the provincial government or in the Montreal Island Council. The latter is composed of eight boards, five of which could be described as suburban, with all that that implies about their attitudes to the city and its problems. This dual centralization is illustrated by the following: teachers' salaries and workloads are negotiated provincially and are uniform throughout the province; budgetary norms are established by the Ministry of Education; and local tax rates are set by the Island Council. In this straight jacket, the big city school boards feel increasingly powerless, and quite palpably are.

In Montreal, the degree of frustration and disillusionment is probably greatest in the Montreal Catholic School Commission and the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, still among the largest boards in Canada. The members of these boards were for the first time elected to power in 1973, in a cloud of euphoria generated by the feeling that at last the Montreal public would take over its own schools after decades of governance by boards appointed by the Government and the

2. Source: Pierre-André Julien, Pierre Lamonde, Daniel Latouche, *Québec 2001, Une société refroidie*, Québec, Les éditions du boréal express, 1976.

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Church. They have painfully discovered how little real power they had, because of these financial constraints imposed by others.

The drop in the school population that I referred to earlier is now making this problem of powerlessness and inflexibility acute. In 1969, the enrolment in the M.C.S.C., for example, was 230,000. In 1978 it is about 150,000, a loss of about 10,000 pupils per year, a rate that has been constant for seven years and promises to continue into the eighties. When the present board came to power three years ago, it inherited an elaborate superstructure which had had a demonstrable *raison d'être* in the period of rapid growth in the late sixties. The board had established and developed its own Construction Office, Legal Office, Computer Service, Central Library, and Program Development Office, with all the bureaucratic paraphernalia that accompanies complex organizations. Some of these services were funded either by special agreements with the Ministry of Education or from locally determined taxes. Almost brutally, both of these sources have been cut off, and the board has been ordered to finance its operations inside the norms that apply for other boards in the province and on the Island, none of which compare in size, type of clientele, or just plain history.

The socio-political issue

So it can be seen, as I suggested earlier, that although this issue can be described as financial or economic, its effects have to do with power and spill over to the next major category, which is socio-political. If it is true that Quebec is not like the other provinces, it may be truer that Montreal is not like other Quebec cities. It has much in common with many other North American cities in that its population has a relatively low per capita income, pockets of dense poverty, transportation problems, pollution problems, and massive anomie or alienation among its citizens. Much of this is invisible to the casual observer or visitor, but the effects touch the school system inescapably and become visible in the debates of the school boards.

For example, in the last provincial elections, the strength of the Parti Québécois continued to be concentrated in the Montreal area. Aside from the separatist plank in its platform, this party is perceived by many to be a populist party, interested in grass roots democracy, dis-establishment, and social reform of a deeper kind than even we, in Quebec, have so far experienced. At the local level, this same general populist movement has produced candidates for school board seats who share these general social values.

The emergence of this new kind of board member has already had visible effects in the MCSC and to a lesser extent in the PSBGM, and is likely to continue to do so. For example, in 1974 the MCSC ordered a study of the possibility of establishing participative management in the high schools. The reception of the eventual report by the administrative establishment has been cold to say the least, and its recommendations

have been only half-heartedly acted upon by the board because of ideological conflicts among the members. Two other programs of the board have come under attack as well, attacks which are symptomatic of the stresses we are experiencing. The first of these is the multi-million dollar program for schools in socio-economically deprived areas, and the second is the system of academic evaluation developed by the pedagogical services for the French schools of the board. These attacks reflect a generalized belief on the part of the new populists that both programs are designed to perpetuate the class system in society; the one because of its allegedly patronizing treatment of the sub-culture of the poor, the other because it succeeds mainly in streaming the poor into dead-end programs.

In their first term in office, which ended in June 1977, these self-styled "progressive" board members of the MCSC were highly visible and not surprisingly made every effort to organize themselves into a true party. However, the electorate appears to have found their desire for rapid and radical change to be somewhat frightening. To the surprise of everyone, the progressives were swept from office, to be replaced by a slate who are determined to retain what they consider to be the old values. For example, the basis for the organization of school boards in Montreal, as elsewhere in the province, is religion. The progressives had been in favour of replacing confessional boards with unified boards, which would govern all the schools in a given territory, irrespective of language or religion. The new conservative majorities elected to the Catholic boards on the island are firmly opposed to this change.

Integration of immigrants

There are, as well as these larger social issues, several micro-issues that are social in nature and which, at the same time, have pedagogical effects. For example, there is the problem of the integration of immigrants. Quebec, in recent years, received about 30,000 immigrants per year. About $\frac{1}{3}$ of these speak neither English nor French, $\frac{1}{3}$ English only, and $\frac{1}{3}$ French only or both English and French. The vast majority of these come to Montreal and specifically into the territory of the Montreal Catholic School Commission. About 17% of them are of school age, which means that our board has been faced with the problem of assimilating about 1700 non-English, non-French speaking children per year.

Until a few years ago, these "allophones", as they are now popularly called, attended English Catholic schools principally. This was one of the primary reasons for the passage of Bill 22 and Bill 101. However, even before this legislation, the French Catholic system had established "welcoming classes" for the children of immigrants. After a slow start, these classes finally began to catch on, even with English-speaking immigrants, partly because they offer half-time pre-kindergartens for 4-year olds and full-time kindergartens for 5-year olds, with small class size. After spending a year or so in these classes, the children are streamed into the regular French system. The current debate in the fran-

cophone community is whether this system does not overly segregate these children, thereby reinforcing their differences and their estrangement from the main stream. There will have to be an attempt to shift the attitudes of a whole community — a complex challenge for the francophones and their schools — if they are to succeed in attracting and assimilating future immigrants to the French schools, especially if the debate over the teaching of English as a second language remains unresolved.

There are two other phenomena of recent development that are of importance to the educational system in Montreal particularly, again in the francophone sector, and the two have an interesting association. The first is the rapid re-emergence of the private school, particularly at the secondary level. The second is the rapid increase in the drop-out rate in the French high schools. Shortly before the educational reforms of the mid-sixties in Quebec, the public high schools in Montreal attracted something less than 20% of the relevant age groups; a fair proportion of the population was in private schools. By the early seventies, with the forced draft establishment of the network of new comprehensive high schools, nearly 90% of the relevant population completed their secondary studies, and the private schools had all but disappeared. However, over the last four years the drop-out rate in the French sector (which does not include transfers from the public to the private schools) has more than doubled to a disquieting 12%, while private schools now enroll about 6% of the total population. This small network of private high schools reported an increase of 35% in application for 1977-78.

These two phenomena have been considered jointly because they are widely regarded as being symptomatic of a spreading disenchantment with the public school system, as evidence of the failure of the public schools to produce what they promise, or at least what the parents say they expect of them.

Since the private schools in Quebec are supported by the provincial treasury to the tune of up to 80% of their costs, some have seen in their growth a sinister plot on the part of the previous Liberal government to perpetuate the class system in society by encouraging private education and ironically to permit the learning of English by a certain class of French Canadian. The concern is so wide-spread that the Island Council itself recommended to the Ministry that these schools be brought under tighter government control by, among other things, being made subject to the norms and rules that apply in the public sector, as well as to the Charter of the French Language (Bill 101).

Administrative and pedagogical issues

The administrative issue is related primarily to board structures on the Island of Montreal. As I noted previously, there are eight boards on the Island, ranging in size from less than 10,000 pupils to 150,000 pupils, and a super-body called the Island Council, one of whose func-

tions was to propose to the Minister a new reorganization of these eight boards. A committee was established to study the problem, but had no more success in reaching a consensus on a solution than previous provincial governments had achieved in previous attempts; the whole subject remains in its former state of suspended animation. The problem as it may appear to the Ministry may be two-fold: first, the existence of both the heretofore powerful Montreal Catholic School Commission (sometimes referred to as "the second MEQ") and the P.S.B.G.M. is sometimes an embarrassment to the Ministry as well as seeming inordinately expensive; and second, some of the smaller boards are probably too weak to provide the full range of services said to be necessary in a modern system of education. Meanwhile, the Island Council itself has gradually encroached in areas that the boards consider to lie exclusively within their jurisdiction, to the point where much clearer lines of authority between the boards and the new Council will have to accompany any future reorganization, if the stresses between the two levels are not to paralyze the whole system.

The pedagogical issues are remarkably similar across language and religious lines in Montreal. None of the boards has escaped the current wave of accusations against the public schools, to the effect that they are increasingly irrelevant, fail to teach the basics, do not respond to the particular needs of different milieux, and so forth. The French population is very concerned about the poor quality of French instruction and English population about the poor quality of English and French instruction; all are struggling to define continuous progress in practice. Many are worried about the growth of Special Education, which according to one recent survey by the Federation of Catholic School Boards bids fair to rival "regular" education in size and importance in the near future.

In this brief overview, I have identified and named some issues in urban education in Montreal without examining hypothetical solutions. Most of these problems are purely political in nature in the sense that no convincing, demonstrable rational solutions exist. Who can say with certainty that English can and should be taught to French-Canadian 5-year olds? Who can say with certainty what the optimal size for a school board should be? The system, however, seems to be slowly but surely evolving in the direction of greater local control, partly as a reaction to the centralizing trend referred to earlier. The Ministry has recently launched an elaborate program of consultation on a general program of educational reform, which I presume to be both a symptom of the general sensitivity to these issues and a stimulus of this evolution, which in any case has already begun. The immediate problem for urban educational systems is how to promote this evolution while at the same time retaining some kind of control of the monies being consumed by the public schools, as well as pursuing the inevitably state-determined aims of education.

NOTE

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration, Quebec, June 1976.