

(Vive la différence!)

Closing School Boards

"In the present state of school democracy, budgets will not be administered any worse by the Laurin formula - a commission formed of delegates from school committees - than under the existing system. The White Paper should be criticized for not going to the root of the problem: Does democratic participation still have any meaning in the regional administration of education?

"If so, it (regional administration) should be urgently channelled into providing a framework, support for schools; this would be a break from the role of elected treasurers, which is what school commissioners are. That is an urgent reform ..."

Lise Bissonnette of **Le Devoir** was responding in July to criticisms of a White Paper put out by Camille Laurin, Minister of Education in Quebec. French-speaking opponents of the anticipated legislation characterized it as unwarrantably centralizing the management of education in the Ministry. English-speakers denounced it as a purely political attack on their community's position in the province. In the furor that will continue to grip many of our Quebec readers through the fall, no remarks made here about the proper relationships between school boards and parents are likely to escape judgments made by the glaring light of this local conflict.

It is a nice irony that, whereas the focus of this issue of the Journal is on public protests aimed at school boards across Canada about the closing of schools, in Quebec what is upsetting the public is the prospect of closing the school boards. Things are being said in the province that would have surprised their own sayers only a year or two ago. It is widely repeated by quite reputable people that parents simply cannot have the time or the skill to handle the additional responsibilities that are now to be

devolved on elected school committees. The regional school boards, scheduled on the other hand to lose suffrage and several responsibilities as well as their present identities, are now asserted to have come down to us through the ages as the chief manifestations of democratic leadership in the English-speaking community; yet these are the same institutions which until recently represented, complacently enough, images to the public of stereotyped oligarchic arrogance, and on which membership was rarely if ever decided by a vote.

The one consistent note being struck, among the various whacking sounds of many sticks to beat the dog, is of an angry conviction that M. Laurin is out to get the English. He has doubtless given plenty of reason for people to think so. But the fact that he has headed for little over a year the Ministry that has conceived the very comprehensive plans being brought forward does rather seem to escape notice. Such plans take a lot longer than a year of ministerial gestation to come to fruition.

Whatever M. Laurin's motives (and sardonic pleasures) may really be, one recognizes a sharp truth in Bissonnette's dismissal of regional school boards as elected treasurers. Except rarely, and then indirectly (should they have appointed, and then tolerated, unusually able people as their executive officers), regional school boards anywhere have little to their credit, and a good deal to their discredit, in the record of actions that have been taken affecting the quality of education in schools. The best thing that might be said of many is that they habitually left all such decisions to the professionals, while they looked after the interests of their apparent constituents, the tax-payers. Yet what a dereliction of duty to their real constituents - the people who are children now - is implied in that admission. Especially so, when one considers with what rarity professionals of any judgment emerge at the top of the thoroughly bureaucratized and largely untrained, timid, harried, and convention-bound educational hierarchy.

But if school board democracy has failed to make any dent in the massive venality of that hierarchy (which in time corrupts the greater part of the young and generous-minded who join it as teachers), is it the fault of wicked school-board members (who almost invariably exhaust themselves in largely thankless service); or of the indolent public, who are roused into participatory action only by the emergency of having their school moved to some less convenient spot?

When the excitement of parents over a school closure has died down, will not their involvement, and their new confidence and knowledgeability about getting things done in schools the way they want them, fade gradually away? Once decisions are seen

Editorial

to be being taken that more or less earn their confidence, we can predict what most parents will do. Anyone who has been one, with more than one child in the family, knows how daily priorities are handled week after week in a household over-crowded with things to do. Short-term projects, like getting to the skating rink, get done; long-term things like getting understanding, or justice, wait for ever at the bottom of the pile in the file.

Can the parental energies aroused by the drama of school closure really be harnessed to resolution of longer-running issues in local education that the regional boards have ignored? The answer of several of the papers in these pages seems to be yes, but only if the right institutions are set up - and they generally aren't there now, at any level. So whatever the results of the annual Plains of Abraham Memorial All-Star Battle (and no doubt these will duly be reported in what one might call the sports pages of the Quebec press), the prospect of elected bodies effectively running local schools in congruence with the wishes of parents is surely not to be sniffed at - even if they have been developed as a sort of educational spin-off from the technology of political warfare.

J.K.H.