

Montreal Teachers in Transition Since 1967

One is never far away from the sounds of battle in the Quebec school of today. When "the sleeping giant" of Quebec finally arose, there followed year after year in public education of confused alarms of struggle and flight, each hot on the heels of the last, each rising still to the same pitch and tone though the battle cries now differ. Has there been any real change in the school? Are those armies, clashing in the night, as ignorant as they were? In the decade past, Donald Peacock embodied for many the persona of the militant Protestant teacher, as he led the members of his union into unprecedented confrontations and alliances, turning their conceptions of friend and foe upside down. Here, with characteristic terseness, he reflects on what was accomplished in those heady years before the current headaches began.

Before anyone starts to read this (and thus finds out the awful truth for himself), let me disclaim any academic pretensions for my views. As Doctors Isherwood, Anderson, and Henchey at McGill wearily discovered last year, reviews of "the literature" and substantiation by footnote are not my style: nevertheless, I suggest that the house of academe should reserve a small room for involved practitioners. Call it primary, ethnographic material, you purists.

My aim in this article is modest: to summarise what I thought we were doing when teachers of the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal first unionised in 1966, to attempt to evaluate what, if anything, we achieved, and to describe briefly the causes of any changes. But first I must give my (necessarily biased) views of what Montreal Protestant teachers were like in 1966.

Our school system was enjoying its last autonomous years; the sleeping giant had at last woken from its age-long, sweet dream of a Catholic yesteryear, and our place at the top of the prestige pyramid in Quebec public education was about to be undermined. One might argue that it was our comparative success, in terms of public perception, which had aroused the majority to create a modern educational system for its own children. But, while the Catholic Church was well aware of the implications of a Ministry-run system and negotiated its own "concordat" with the secular arm, the Protestant hierarchy ignored these developments, and our teachers remained oblivious to the changes. Our application for a bargaining certificate was in fact a gut reaction to a hopelessly inadequate Board salary offer, rather than the result of a fundamental change in our somewhat complacent thinking. Indeed, those of us who advocated the formation of a teachers' union found it politic to talk of a "syndicate" (with all its Mafia overtones) rather than use that alien and working-class word, "union".

There had, however, been some changes in our thinking. We had finally formed a joint negotiating committee, while preserving our three associations (one for men and two for women). And more and more of our elementary women teachers had taken a Bachelor of Education rather than the traditional one or two year certificate, and were reacting quite aggressively to the paternalism of their male administrators. But most of the men teachers were graduates who considered themselves an elite of potential promotees (if becoming a vice-principal is a promotion).

It was surely symptomatic of our isolation from the vast majority of Quebec teachers that Bill 25 was designed to stop a series of Catholic strikes, of which we were but dimly aware, and to put some provincial order into negotiations in the Catholic sector; but it inadvertently stopped our first-ever negotiations. We were largely irrelevant to the overall scheme of things and I fear we still are. I recently asked Yves Martin, for so long the indefatigable Deputy Minister of Education, if he now regretted the massive declassification of Protestant teachers. He replied that he had always preferred our classification system, but could not impose it province-wide for political reasons; and that, in any case, his main purpose was to rationalise the French Catholic system and to encourage its teachers to improve their qualifications. It is surely comforting to know that the single most traumatic experience for our teachers (next to increasing surpluses) was purely accidental.

It is often bandied about that Montreal Protestant teachers' militancy in the 70's was due to "firebrands" like myself - ("the Pierre Bourgeault of English Quebec", "the Joe Davidson of Montreal teachers" and other much less complimentary soubriquets were in vogue) as well as to the

sinister influence of the Centrale de l'Enseignement du Quebec. One might call this the "wicked foreign union leader conspiracy theory", on a par with the "wicked (Jewish) banker theory" so beloved of early Social Crediters.

Then why did our respectable, largely middle-class teachers start walking picket-lines and organising mass marches in Quebec City? This was caused by two other phenomena:

1) the extraordinarily rapid changes in educational organization emanating from the Ministry in Quebec, together with an increase in public expectations of the public school system. More children came into our schools for longer, and wanted more and different things from us, while Quebec City flooded us increasingly with the results of its attempts to respond to the new needs.

2) the gradual erosion of our local Board's ability (and, I believe, **will**) to maintain its own way of doing things. This collapse of what we used to call the "Greater Board" had an effect on our more conservative teachers similar to that of an induced birth on a foetus, left us bereft of our security symbol, and drove us into an alliance with our French counterparts.

It is of course true that I personally favoured this alliance and did all I could to encourage our teachers to identify with other teachers, rather than with what I considered an obsolete and increasingly incapable Protestant hierarchy. But my survival for fourteen years as an elected leader was the **result** of these changes, rather than the cause.

Our early aim was to liberate teachers from both their mental and their physical constraints, to get them to believe that **they** knew best what they were doing, and to give them a reasonable work-load so that they could perform better in a very stress-filled job. I believe that we have largely achieved this; the framework is in place.

Our "mariage de convenance" with C.E.Q. became a worthwhile end in itself as time went on, and has become today a good deed in an (increasingly) naughty world. My one regret is that the cartel has only limited social impact on the stultifying ethnocentricity of both communities. I hope desperately that our union, composed as it is of teachers from all ethnic and linguistic groups in Quebec, may serve as "a bridge over troubled waters" in an increasingly polarised province.

I also hope that generalised and unthinking dissatisfaction with public education will not wash away our hard-won gains in a flood of cut-backs and political interference with the vital work we do in the classroom.



Donald Peacock led his union into unprecedented united action with the other teachers' unions of Quebec during the crucial years of 1976-80, until a plane crash nearly took his life (as it did others of his group). He now teaches at St. Laurent High School, and lists at the top of his interests, "Children (his own three plus any others placed in his cage at school)." Educated in England, he was for many years President of the Montreal Teachers Association before being elected President of the Provincial Association of Protestant Teachers for the period named above.

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