

## A possibly magna Carta

One becomes heartily tired sometimes of the childish style in which adults habitually conduct their quarrels over the treatment to be accorded to children at the hands of the state. For whatever the reason - some association perhaps with the naive hatreds and fears that once characterised a speaker's own experience with schools - and under whatever rhetorical disguises, the pronouncements of public individuals and of public bodies on issues of education under controversy rarely consist of more than ill-concealed expressions of self-assertion, anxiety, suspicion, and resentment: expressions characteristic of immaturity and showing only glimpses of that dispassionate exercise of judgment which level-headed people might display. For those who have lived in Quebec these past two decades, these existing tendencies in any social polity have been sadly accentuated by differences of language and race.

The articles that follow in this issue are unusual for the "MJE", as they are written entirely by members of the Faculty of education at McGill, its parent institution. Some three years ago the effort was undertaken to examine to what degree actual, contemporary, living enterprise, by people working in schools in Quebec, corresponded to blueprints being developed by the Ministry of Education for the kind of ideal enterprise that it envisaged under the title of Educational Projects. That the real enterprises selected were being conducted in English-speaking schools, whereas the blue prints were emerging from a bureaucratic machine almost exclusively French, threatened to render the subject touchy. But all matters of education, taken seriously, are potentially touchy; and it is the business of a Faculty of Education to attempt dispassionate judgments. So now the MJE is at pains to give a somewhat wider circulation to this report that ensued, with its cases and commentaries, than it received when it first appeared last year - in the conviction that examples of dispassionate judgment are

surely needed in the current climate of discussion about the future of education in Quebec.

That current climate has been soured by the recent (though quite traditional) manhandling of teachers by a government which treats them as clerical employees, and it has been politicised by a Ministry bill that seeks to rationalise its system by treating school boards as once did kings their over-mighty barons. Both king and barons are claiming to represent the best interests of the humble population of client school children, while playing games with the feelings of the voting population that includes their parents.

Accordingly these articles, conceived together, should be read together, from the several unassuming accounts of simple-seeming events - occurring on a scale in everyday schools - to the scholarly analysis establishing first the framework to which those accounts respond, and then concluding not only by raising questions but also by raising our sights. Those simple-seeming events have clearly made all the difference to the kinds of place their schools are for those who inhabit them. These things are so obviously right, one has to ask why they can't happen all the time, in every school? Do such states of positive participation need exceptional, "charismatic" people to bring them about? The answer seems to be that, yes, in existing circumstances, perhaps they do. One can therefore understand an idealistic government wanting to make blueprints, if that will help.

It is a picture in which individuals in schools have taken initiatives; school boards, those cumbrous manifestations of democracy lost in bureaucracy, have played very little but belated, facilitating roles. If we ask whether the Ministry in Quebec really means it when it talks about "Educational Projects"; and whether it really means it when it talks about devolving powers to local schools from school boards; at least we may concede that there is a consistency about these two ground-breaking proposals that may indeed have the best interests of the humble population at heart. A strong king at least has the ability to make things happen. Whereas barons left to themselves are regretfully likely, as history recites, to fall back on sneering at each other and playing other baronial games. How many centuries did it take before Magna Carta touched the common man?

**J.K.H.**