



"Karna"

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The Public School Myth: Quebec Education 1875-1960

Abstract

This article argues that Quebec public education, as measured by conventional criteria, was more fiction than fact before 1960. Specifically, it is charged that those who ruled education were neither accountable to the public nor representative of it. In addition, it is alleged that public education was unaccommodating to immigrant and minority groups.

There is reason to doubt the claim that the character and structure of *public education* in Quebec from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century was actually "public." More specifically, it is alleged that public education, as measured by conventional means, was more fiction than fact during the period.

What is in dispute is not that Quebec had a public school system. Indeed, a system of popular schools had been in place since well before Confederation. Rather, the contention is that the school system was flawed, that it did not subscribe to the commonly accepted definition of public education, namely, an enterprise which is publicly financed, publicly controlled, and open to the public. The remainder of this article will be devoted to showing that Quebec education between 1875 and 1960 did not meet two of the three criteria; that while it was maintained at public expense it was not truly under public auspices and was unaccommodating to immigrant and minority populations.

A word about the period is in order. The 1875-1960 period is known as the traditional era in Quebec education. The early date coincides with the 1875 Act which gave final form to a dual denominational school system and

which saw Catholics and Protestants go their own way in matters of learning. The high and impenetrable wall of separation between the two educational solitudes would remain intact for the next seventy-five years. The cutoff date of 1960 was chosen because it represents a watershed in Quebec educational history, marking the end of an old epoch and the beginning of a new one. A traditional system, rooted in division and clericalism, began to give way to a modern school system centred around secularism and pluralism.

Public Funding

As was mentioned previously, the question of the financing of public education is not being contested, though the amount of revenue raised and the method of taxation used are open to criticism. At any rate, during that period the local property tax was the principal source of school funding, supplemented by provincial government grants and tuition fees. Until the Second World War almost 90 per cent of public school income was derived from the property tax. Critics of the arrangement like to point out that the tax on property was a regressive device since it placed a financial burden on a specific and limited population. While the argument has logic on its side, it ignores historical reality. The fact is that long before the rise of public education and the introduction of more progressive forms of taxation, property was synonymous with wealth, and hence the favourite target of the ubiquitous taxman. This tradition was not easily put aside in the 1840s when the Quebec public school system was created. The point is that Quebec education between 1875 and 1960 was publicly financed, employing a mode of taxation that enjoyed widespread acceptance in its day. Moreover, in relying exclusively on the property tax for the raising of school revenue, Quebec was behaving in a manner consistent with the rest of North America.

Private Control of Public Education

To inquire whether a school system is under public control is to examine its decision makers and the mechanism by which they are chosen. It will be argued in this section that those who directed and managed Quebec education during the period were neither accountable to the public nor representatives of it, being more representative of special interests.

School Boards

In treating the question it behooves us to describe the administrative structure of public education for the 1875-1960 epoch. As with other provinces across the country, education in Quebec was a shared responsibility of local and central authorities. At the local level was the

school board, an educational fixture in the province since before Confederation. Many in number and varied in size, boards resembled educational fiefdoms, each possessing considerable powers in its own jurisdiction. In addition to collecting its own taxes, a board made important pedagogical and curricular decisions. At the provincial level educational authority was vested in the Council of Public Instruction, composed of a Catholic Committee and a Protestant Committee. But because the two committees rarely met together the council became in effect a paper organization. The two denominational committees, operating separately and independently of each other, were from 1875 the supreme authorities in public education. Subordinate and answerable to the committees was the Department of Public Instruction, headed by a superintendent.

The first thing that catches one's eye is that membership on the provincial committees and the school boards was not determined by universal suffrage. The ballot box played a limited role in Quebec public education before 1960. Here we must make a distinction between school boards in Montreal and Quebec City and those elsewhere in the province. Only in the latter were members elected, albeit by limited suffrage. Put simply, it was an election by and for property owners. Taxpayers alone were eligible to run for a seat on a board, and taxpayers alone were qualified to vote them into office.¹ On the other hand, for the forerunners of the Montreal Catholic School Commission and the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal and their counterparts in Quebec City, membership was strictly by appointment and was reserved for Catholic and Protestants, respectively. The power to appoint board members in the two cities belonged to the city and provincial governments, and in the case of the Catholic commissions to the local bishop as well.

The dispute here is less with the small school board and its propertied electorate than with the large city boards and provincial denominational committees, whose members were appointed and in some instances by persons other than government authorities. In order to make the case we must first review the 1875 Act, which fixed the organizational pattern of public education for almost a century. Central to the legislation was a provision to replace the Ministry of Public Instruction by the Department of Public Instruction. The author of the measure was the provincial premier, Charles Boucher de Boucherville, who was also minister of education. Historians are in general agreement that the suppression of the ministry was rooted in the belief that education and politics, like oil and water, do not mix; that the cause of education is best served when it is divorced from the tumultuous world of partisan politics. Better a superintendent who is a civil servant than a minister who is a politician, seemed to be the message.

Politics, education, and religion

Yet there is reason to suspect this interpretation. If politics, as charged by Boucherville and others, was the *bête noire* of education, how do we account for the fact that every superintendent for the next fifty years was an ex-politician? Indeed, the first office holder was Gédéon Ouimet, who two years earlier had been premier and education minister. Ouimet's active political career did not disqualify him from holding the superintendency for twenty years. His successor, Pierre Boucher de La Bruère, who held the post from 1895 to 1916, was no less a political figure, having been president of the Legislative Council (upper house) from 1882 to 1889 and from 1892 to 1895.

The underlying reason for the suppression of the Ministry of Public Instruction was not politics as such but a growing, often irrational, fear of the state. To many in the province, state participation in education posed a potential threat to the integrity of religious schools. Quebec Catholics were not indifferent spectators to the wave of anticlericalism sweeping across Europe, which produced in its wake lay schools under state auspices. To avoid a similar "tragedy" in the province, it was judged imperative that the state role in public education be curtailed. Thus the substitution of a superintendent for a minister was applauded as a step in the right direction. The architects of the 1875 Act did their job well. Their superintendent was without power and prestige, being an administrator whose duties included the distribution of government grants to schools and the publication of educational statistics. Nor was the superintendent top man in the educational hierarchy. Article 7 of the law stipulated that the "superintendent . . . is bound to comply with the directions of the Council of Public Instruction, or with those of the Roman Catholic Committee or Protestant Committee" (Statutes of the Province of Quebec, 1875, p. 51).

Loss of the public voice

In abolishing the education ministry the 1875 Act dealt a blow to the spirit of public education. From that time forward Quebec education was without an elected voice at the provincial level. Without an educational representative in government the people found it difficult to communicate their concerns and to participate in the making of educational policy for the province. Education became an affair of appointed officials and faceless bureaucrats, who worked behind closed doors, away from the prying glances of the public.

Public control of education was further eroded by changes in the character and composition of the Catholic and Protestant committees, which had been part of the Council of Public Instruction since 1869. When the education ministry was suppressed in 1875 the council was expected to

succeed it as power authority. Such, however, was not the case. Because the law divided the council into two distinct committees, they, rather than the council, became the supreme educational authorities in the province, a development confirmed by Superintendent Ouimet in his first report (Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the Year 1875-76, 1876, p. 1). Stripped of its *raison d'être*, the Council of Public Instruction fell on hard times in the years ahead. Between 1876 and 1908 it met only thirteen times; from 1908 to 1960 it did not meet at all. Educational policy was discussed and decided not in a moribund council but in the two committees. In effect, the province had two "education ministries" since each committee operated independently of the other. In short, the Catholic Committee made policy for Catholic public education and the Protestant Committee for Protestant public education. Being that the denominational committees were the real power brokers in Quebec public education from 1875, their composition is crucial to the issue under review.

Role of the Catholic clergy

Certainly the most striking feature of the 1875 Act was that which accorded the Catholic clergy strong representation on the Catholic Committee. The law provided that all bishops whose diocese was situated in whole or in part in the Province of Quebec were *ex officio* members of the committee. The remainder of the committee was composed of an equal number of lay members appointed by the government. On the other hand, no special provision was made for religious members on the Protestant committee. Its size was to be half that of the Catholic Committee, with all members being appointed by the government.

The issue here is not that the episcopate was represented on the Catholic Committee, but that its membership was one of right and of such strength as to give it an advantage in the determination of public educational policy. Not only did the bishops hold half the seats on the committee, but they dominated the proceedings by dint of a favourable attendance policy. Minutes of the meetings reveal that the bishops had a far better attendance record than lay members, who normally included ex-politicians, judges, and other professionals (Audet, 1964, p. 120). One reason for this occurrence is that Article 11 of the 1875 Act permitted ecclesiastics the option of sending voting delegates in their place in cases of absence (Statutes of the Province of Quebec, 1875, p. 51). Curiously, this option was not extended to the lay members of the committee. At any rate, due to their strong representation on the committee, coupled with their active participation in its deliberations, the bishops were able to exercise a decisive influence on Catholic public education until 1960, being well positioned to block policies contrary to their church as well as to advance their own.

It would be tempting to read into the 1875 law the trappings of a clerical conspiracy. The temptation should be resisted, not because the Quebec episcopate was without the means for effecting an educational coup, but because the circumstances did not require it. There were highly placed politicians like Boucherville who were only too eager to serve the interests of the church. In fact, before tabling the 1875 bill in the Legislative Assembly, the premier sent a copy of the measure to the bishops for comments and suggestions. Not surprisingly, the great majority of them responded favourably to a proposal that promised them a key role in public education. With the notable exception of the ultramontane Bishop Bourget of Montreal, who reasoned that the episcopate could be more educationally effective operating outside rather than inside the Catholic Committee, the province's bishops encouraged the premier to go forward with his measure (Audet, 1964, pp. 80-92).

The 1875 bill was introduced in the Legislative Assembly on November 26. A month later it was law, having attracted little publicity and opposition along the way. Despite the failed attempt of English politicians to amend the bill in the direction of two superintendents (one Catholic and one Protestant), they voted in favour of the measure (*The Gazette*, 1875). Protestant educational authorities welcomed the legislation because, in strengthening the hand of the committees, the law accorded them greater autonomy in the running of their schools.

In conclusion, the 1875 Act was a ringing defeat for the cause of public education. In suppressing the Ministry of Public Instruction and elevating the role of the denominational committees, the law put public education squarely in the hands of non-elected officials and private authorities. Moreover, in granting the bishops a decisive position on the Catholic Committee, the act violated one of the fundamental tenets of public education, that it should be controlled by those who speak for the public. No amount of logic will alter the fact that a church or sect, be it Catholic, Protestant or other, is a private organization whose interests and loyalties are ultimately non-public. The strong clerical voice in Quebec education had a retarding effect on the progress of public education in the period under study. If Quebec was one of the last societies in North America to adopt free and compulsory education, the answer lies with a Catholic public policy in education.

Private Character of Public Education

The term "public" is a mainstay of contemporary life. In addition to public schools we speak of public parks, public libraries, and even pubs (short for public houses). We also speak of corporations going public and candidates running for public office. Whatever the context, "public" denotes that institutions or services are maintained for, used by, or open to the

people or community. This section will argue that Quebec education before 1960 fell short of the definition, that in outlook and behaviour the public school resembled a private school.

The Irish and Catholic education

The first point to be grasped is that Quebec public education evolved along dual denominational lines, a Catholic school for the majority French population and a Protestant school for the minority English population. This division sufficed in the first half of the nineteenth century but became problematical in the second half with the arrival of immigrants who did not fit neatly into the dual denominational mould. This development called into question a school system that was at once public and religiously based.

The challenge to Quebec education occurred mainly in Montreal, where most immigrants settled. Irish immigrants poured into the city in such great numbers in the decades preceding Confederation that by mid-century they counted 12,000 or 20 per cent of the population. The Irish "misfortune" was that most of them were English and Catholic, which placed them in an educational no man's land. If Irish parents sent their children to French Catholic schools, their language was at risk; if they sent them to English Protestant schools, their religion was in jeopardy. As things turned out the choice was made for them. Since public education was officially divided along religious lines and since religion was, unlike today, a more potent unifying force than language, the Irish population was compelled to enrol its children in French Catholic schools.

Although French Canadians warmly received Irish children as fellow Catholics into their schools, they were hard pressed to satisfy the linguistic needs of their clients. In the scheme of things, Irish youngsters attending Catholic schools received a bilingual education, some classes being taught in French, others in English. Unfortunately the standard of instruction in English was often poor owing to the fact that the teachers were native French speakers. The result was that usually children left school knowing French and English but knowing neither well. This situation gave rise to Irish demands for their own schools, administered and staffed by English Catholics.

The school was not the only centre of conflict between the two peoples. They also clashed over church matters. Just as Irish Catholics expressed the desire to be educated separately, so did they prefer to worship separately, to have their own parishes and churches. Spiritual relations between French and English Catholics worsened in 1866 when Bishop Bourget of Montreal reorganized the boundaries of the ancient parish of Notre Dame, in effect eliminating an Irish parish. Outraged at the prospect of seeing St. Patrick's transformed into a bilingual parish, Irish religious

and lay leaders petitioned Rome for a nullification of the bishop's order, winning relief in 1872 when a papal decree ruled in their favour.

In the opinion of some historians, the educational and spiritual conflicts between the Irish and the French may be attributed to the simple fact that they did not like one another. In the words of one writer: "Unlike the Scots whose relations with the French were reasonably happy, the Irish Catholics seemed to harbor some kind of natural antipathy towards the French" (Moir, 1971, p. 60). According to this view, cool relations between the two peoples were aggravated by language differences and economic rivalry.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century Irish Catholics expressed dissatisfaction with the educational opportunities available to them, particularly in the realm of secondary and higher learning. A persistent complaint was that French secondary schools (known as classical colleges) were ill-suited to the needs of English Catholic boys, who aspired to McGill University or other English-language institutions outside the province. The classical colleges, it was charged, were in the business of preparing French Canadian boys for Laval University. Rebuffed in their efforts to acquire a greater margin of autonomy within the French Catholic school system, Irish Catholics embarked on a campaign at the end of the century to found their own institutions. The opening of Loyola High School and Loyola College, in 1896, and a second private secondary school, Catholic High School, four years later, proclaimed the population's determination to be masters of its own educational destiny. Heretofore English Catholic boys aiming for university matriculation did their preparatory studies at Collège Sainte-Marie, a French-dominated classical college.

It was not until the 1930s, a century after the first wave of Irish immigration to Canada, that English Catholics gained a measure of independence in Catholic public education, a belated recognition of the fact that a common religion was not sufficient to unite two peoples separated by language and heritage. The decade began with the establishment, in 1931, of D'Arcy McGee, the province's first English Catholic public high school. About the same time the first English Catholic school inspector was appointed. Finally, and most significantly, the end of the decade witnessed the acknowledgement of a separate and distinct English Catholic school curriculum. The traditional, clumsy practice of translating verbatim the French course of study into English was laid to rest. Thus on the eve of the Second World War the province's English Catholic population – composed by this time of many ethnic groups – had achieved its goal of an autonomous school system, albeit within a larger Catholic framework.

Jews and the Protestant schools

It should be clear that Quebec public education was not designed with a pluralist society in mind, that the dual denominational structure, reinforced by linguistic ties, proved to be an inappropriate system for those who were neither French Catholic nor English Protestant. The arrival in Montreal of Jewish immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century posed new and more serious questions as to the legitimacy of public education. In short, could a Christian school system accommodate a non-Christian people? Jews were to discover early in the game that as non-Catholics they were *persona non grata* in Catholic schools. The social and religious climate of the day would not allow it. Nor were Jews knocking on the Catholic school door; they were little attracted to an institution committed to forming the Christian personality. From the outset they were drawn to the Protestant school, its English-language instruction, its nonsectarian approach to religion and its practical curriculum.

It would be comforting to report that Jews enjoyed full educational rights in Montreal's Protestant schools. It was not the case. For while Jewish children were nominally admitted to Protestant schools their right to be there was in doubt. The Superior Court of Quebec ruled in a turn-of-the-century decision that the rights of Jews were less than those of Protestants in public education. The case centred around Jacob Pinsler, a Jewish pupil, who was denied a Protestant Board of Commissioners' scholarship which he had won in competition and which carried with it free tuition during high school. Pinsler's father took the board to court in an effort to compel the commissioners to award the scholarship to his son. The decision rendered by the court stands as one of the most disturbing in provincial education history. The central question in the litigation was not that of a refused scholarship but the status of non-Protestants in public education. In ruling against Pinsler's petition the presiding judge held that "a resident of the Jewish religion . . . who does not own real estate, cannot claim as of right to have his children admitted to the public schools" (Pinsler, 1903). Public education was thus a right guaranteed to all Protestants, whatever their financial status; for Jews and other non-Protestants the right was limited to property owners. In short, in the realm of public education, some pupils were more equal than others.

Responding to joint demands by Protestants and Jews for remedial action in light of the Pinsler decision, the provincial government enacted legislation in the same year which declared that "persons professing the Jewish religion shall, for school purposes, be treated in the same manner as Protestants . . . and shall enjoy the same rights and privileges as the latter" (Statutes of the Province of Quebec, 1903, p. 155). The law also gave Jewish pupils the right to exempt themselves from religious exercises in

Protestant classrooms. In turn, Jewish property owners were ordered to pay their taxes to Protestant schools.

The 1903 law was perceived as a triumph for both parties. Jews appeared to acquire full rights in Protestant education and Protestant school officials won important tax concessions. Educational peace, however, was shattered several years later when Jewish community leaders claimed that as "Protestants" they were eligible for appointment to the Protestant School Board of Montreal. Their bid for membership on the board was supported by educational statistics, which showed that Jews represented a substantial and growing element of Protestant school enrollments in the city. In 1903, 23 per cent of those attending Protestant schools were Jewish; four years later the figure had risen to 33 per cent. The percentage of Jews in Protestant schools would peak on the eve of the First World War at 44. Protestant school representatives replied that Jewish membership on the board was neither stated nor implied by the 1903 law. In addition, they emphasized that the integrity of Protestant education, protected by Section 93 of the BNA Act, would be seriously compromised were Jews to be appointed to the Board.

The problem would not go away. For the next twenty years Protestants and Jews in Montreal clashed over the meaning of the 1903 law. In 1925 the question was submitted to the court for clarification. Three years and several appeals later the case came before the Privy Council in London, which rendered a landmark decision (Hirsch, 1928). In attempting to define the legal status of Jews in Protestant education, the high court was compelled to explain the education section of the Canadian Constitution, namely, Section 93 of the BNA Act. The court noted that Section 93 assigned educational responsibility to the provinces, except that no provincial legislature could pass laws which "shall prejudicially affect any Right or Privilege with respect to Denominational Schools which any Class of Persons have by Law in the Province at the Union."

The Privy Council explained that Catholics and Protestants were "Class of Persons," meaning that the educational rights which the two denominations possessed in law in 1867 were inviolate. In 1867 there were three categories of public schools in the province: (1) denominational schools in Montreal and Quebec City; and (2) common and (3) dissentient schools outside the two cities. Section 93, said the court, offered constitutional protection to denominational and dissentient schools, but not to common schools. In other words, in the management and control of denominational and dissentient schools the educational powers of Catholic and Protestant authorities were not subject to infringement.

The Privy Council's ruling in the Hirsch case, while constitutionally sound, was socially regrettable since it conferred second

class citizenship on Jews and by implication on all non-Protestants, who were attending Protestant schools in Montreal. The court created legal havoc by voiding the 1903 law, holding that Jews could not be classified as Protestants for educational purposes. They were judged to have rights of attendance to Protestant schools but could not participate in their governance. Thus Jews could not be appointed to school boards in Montreal and Quebec City, and to the Protestant Board of Examiners, which certified teachers for the province.² In what appears to have been a constitutional sop, the Privy Council said in closing that since Section 93 did not "purport to stereotype the educational system of the Province" for all time, Jews were free to establish their own public school system in the two cities because such action would not "prejudicially affect" the educational rights of Catholics and Protestants. Jews, however, chose not to exercise this option.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Quebec public education bore a striking resemblance to private education during the period. While few youngsters were deprived of schooling as such, ethnic and religious minorities suffered the indignity of interlopers, neglected and manipulated by a system that catered to French Catholics and English Protestants. And while public schools in Montreal and Quebec City were in law open to all, the reality was quite different. Catholic schools were off limits to non-Catholics and their Frenchness militated against them providing suitable facilities for English-speaking pupils. Protestant schools, though less exclusive and more obliging than their Catholic counterpart, opened their doors to non-Protestants but balked at according them full educational rights. Where Quebec education went astray between 1875 and 1960 was in trying to serve two masters. Indeed, a public school that is bent on serving religious interests and, at the same time providing education for all, is flirting with the unattainable.

NOTES

1. Priests and ministers were exempted from the property qualification and therefore were eligible to run in school board elections.
2. A postscript to the Hirsch case is that a 1971 provincial law made Jews eligible for membership on the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal. Had the law come under judicial scrutiny, it probably would have been struck down since the ruling in the case was then and still is the law of the land.

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