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MANITOBA SCHOOLS AND CANADIAN NATIONALITY

1890-1923

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I.

PRIOR TO the entry of the Red River Colony into the Canadian federation, the population and schools of the colony had been English and French, Protestant and Catholic. The duality of nationality, and education was given formal recognition in the Manitoba Act in 1870 which granted official status to the French and English languages and to denominational schools. In the course of time, however, the duality of language and education was challenged by the growth of a British-Ontario majority and by the immigration of people who were neither English nor French; and during the period with which this paper is concerned the principle of duality was abandoned.¹ This process was finally completed by the enactment of the School Act of 1916 which established English as the sole official language and created a secular public school system.²

II.

The precarious balance of English and Protestant, French and Catholic, elements in the West rested, not only on the constitutional safeguards of the British North America Act 1867 and the Manitoba Act 1870, but also upon the numerical equality of the two groups. This equality, however, soon disappeared in the face of the comparatively large and rapid inflow of settlers from Ontario and the British Isles. "Le nombre va nous faire défaut" wrote Taché sadly, "et comme sous notre système constitutionnel les nombres sont la force, nous allons nous trouver à la merci de ceux qui ne nous aiment pas"³ → The Roman Catholic clergy fought to preserve the language and culture of Old Quebec in the West, and with aid from Quebec and from France, they encouraged the foundation of compact French-speaking parishes both in Manitoba and the North West Territories.

It was, however, a losing battle, and in 1890 the defences of French culture were breached when Manitoba became a province of municipalities rather than a province of parishes.⁴ The agents of commercial civilization, the railway and the grain trade, had swept away

¹See Noël Bernier, *Fannystelle* (Publié sous les auspices de la Société Historique de Saint-Boniface, Manitoba, n.d. [1939]) p. 162.

²See Pamphlets, Hon. R. S. Thornton, *Bi-Lingual Schools: An Address in the Legislature on January 12th, 1916.* (Department of Education Winnipeg, 1916) p. 11.

³Dom Benoit, *Vie de Monseigneur Taché*, (Montreal, 1904) II, 195-196. Taché wrote to Sir George Cartier in 1869, "J'ai toujours redouté l'entree du Nord-Ouest dans la Confédération parce que j'ai toujours cru que l'élément français catholique serait sacrifié . . ." *Ibid.*, II, 17.

⁴See C. B. Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson, His Life and Letters*, (Toronto, 1947) II, 270.

the old order. In that year the legislature of Manitoba, controlled by the Liberal party under Premier Thomas Greenway, abolished both the official use of the French language in the province and the dual system of separate denominational schools.

For these drastic acts, carried out after nineteen years of comparative satisfaction with the separate school system and two official languages,⁶ there were, in the main, two particular and two general causes. The anti-Catholic agitation which D'Alton McCarthy led in Ontario, in reaction against the Jesuits Estates Act of 1888 and inspired by the fear of *political Catholicism*, was carried to Manitoba in August of 1889. There it awakened a sympathetic response in the new English and Protestant settlements west of the Red River Valley. The agitation neatly coincided with the political embarrassment of the provincial Liberal party, which after the agitation against the railway "monopoly" of the Canadian Pacific Railway, had failed to procure a lowering of freight rates in a contract with the Northern Pacific Railway. To divert attention from their failure, the Liberals had already determined to take up the amendment of the separate school system. "Fighting Joe" Martin's famous outburst on the platform with McCarthy at Portage la Prairie committed the Government to going much farther along the same road, to establish a system of secular public schools and to abolish the official use of the French language.⁷

These two particular causes brought into play two general causes which had been shaping beneath the surface of politics as the settlement of the West proceeded. One was the difficulty and cost of organizing and maintaining municipal and educational institutions on the frontier at the speed competitive settlement required. The burden of local taxes for local improvements and schools was heavy on settlers engaged in making farms in new territory.⁸ The dual system of schools threatened to increase this burden—threatened rather than did, because, as the English and French settlers in Manitoba were segregated, few school districts had in fact to provide separate schools.⁹ Related to the question of cost and also related to the question of duality, was the growing feeling that a country of heterogeneous population, as Manitoba had become with the formation of Mennonite and Icelandic colonies within its borders, should develop a uniform

⁶While there was an outburst in 1875 following the first Ontario immigration after 1870, against the school system and the official use of French, there was in fact little public criticism of either until the late summer of 1889. The point is exhaustively established by A. E. Clague in "The Manitoba School Question, 1890-1896". (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1939) chaps. I-III.

⁷P.A.M., Greenway Papers, Joseph Martin to Thomas Greenway, August 6, 1889; also J. S. Willison, *Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the Liberal Party*, (Toronto, 1903) II, 202.

⁸This point is too easily lost sight of in the controversy over principles. See John S. Ewart, *The Manitoba School Question*, (Toronto, 1894) 246-247; also *Canada, House of Commons Debates*, 1897, I, 371-374. The later phases of the school question in Manitoba and the events leading to the formation of the United Church of Canada enforce the point.

⁹Ewart, *Manitoba School Question*, 63; address before Governor-General in Council, Jan. 21, 1893.

nationality through the agency of a "national" school system.* It was this immigration, neither English nor French, and either Protestant or Catholic, which began to complicate the working of the principle of duality in Manitoba. It was used, by those who questioned the principle itself and feared the political power of the Catholic Church, to justify the abolition of the dual system of education and the denial of the concept of dual nationality.

With the events of the litigation and political controversy caused by the school question from 1890 to 1896 this paper need not be concerned. Suffice it to say that the result was the Laurier-Greenway Compromise of 1896, which was enacted by the Manitoba Legislature in 1897 as an amendment to the School Act of 1890. By the amendment religious teaching, in defined circumstances, was permitted in the public schools from 3:30 to 4 p.m., with a conscience clause which permitted parents to have their children excused from such teaching. The amendment also provided that when ten or more pupils spoke French (or any language other than English) instruction should be "in French (or such other language) and English upon the bi-lingual system". The bi-lingual clause was not directed to circumstances in Manitoba, where the new immigration was just beginning, but to political circumstances in Ontario and Quebec. The concession of teaching in French was designed to please Quebec, the concession of teaching in a language other than French was designed to prevent criticism in Ontario of a grant of equality to the French language alone.¹⁰ It is also to be noted that the amendment of 1897 did nothing to repair the omission from the Act of 1890 of any clause providing for compulsory attendance.¹¹ The public school system of Manitoba

*P.A.M., Manitoba School Case (clippings from contemporary press) 1, 90. Resolution of Grand Lodge (Orange) of Western Ontario; "... separate schools . . . perpetuate an improper union between church and state; . . . they do not teach that the duty of every good citizen is to give his first loyalty to the nation in which he lives . . ."; *Gladstone Age*, Apr. 17, 1895, J. W. Armstrong at public meeting on school question: "Where we have so many different nationalities, it is necessary to have some time to bind them together and blend all their characteristics in one common nationality"; *Winnipeg Tribune*, (clipping) 1895, "Is Manitoba Right?": "If public education has been found necessary in a country like Britain, the necessity is greatly emphasized in a new community like Manitoba, with its heterogeneous and polyglot population, and the great diversity of intelligence and ideas which characterizes its yet unassimilated elements."

For a direct challenge to the principle of duality, see F. C. Wade, *The Manitoba School Question*, (Winnipeg, 1895) 51; "It cannot be conducive to our national welfare to bring up the two great sections of our population apart from each other." The view of John S. Ewart and James Fisher, that a school system at once "national" and "separate" was possible, commanded little sympathy on either side of the controversy.

¹⁰P.A.M., *Manitoba Debates*, (F.P.) 1916, 8; J. W. Daeoe, *Clifford Sifton in Relation to His Times* (Toronto, 1931) 98.

¹¹The explanation of the omission of clauses providing for enforcement of attendance given by Premier R. P. Roblin in the Legislature in 1914 and 1915 may be accepted. Roblin was an independent member of the Legislature in 1890, and the bill of 1890 as amended in committee is in the files of the Legislature of Manitoba, with the attendance section struck out and initialled "C.S.", just as Roblin described it in 1914 and 1915. (See P.A.M., *Manitoba Debates*, (F.P.) 1914, 28-30, and *Manitoba Debates* (Trib.), 1915, 72). Roblin said that Attorney-General Martin, who drew up the bill, had included clauses providing for attendance. On advice from D'Alton McCarthy, however, he had them struck out in committee. The chairman of that committee was Clifford Sifton. It was feared that compulsion would destroy the constitutional ground on which the bill was based, namely that the Catholics had a right to private and voluntary denominational schools, but not to separate schools supported by public funds. To compel the children of Catholic parents to attend the public schools would violate this right.

in 1897 was one in which, because of the right of Catholics to separate private schools, attendance was voluntary.

III.

The passage of the Compromise of 1897 was followed in 1899 by the defeat of the Liberal Party in the provincial election of that year, a defeat in which the Compromise played some part. The accession to power of the Conservative party did not lead to the repeal or amendment of the Compromise. However the administration of the school law now lay with men who were not wholly sympathetic with its terms.¹⁹ The Roblin Government maintained the "national school" system intact in principle and fact, yet in its administration made all possible concessions to the French and Catholics. In rural French parishes the results were satisfactory to the French; only in Winnipeg and St. Boniface did Catholics suffer actual hardship from the operation of the School Act.

Grave and growing difficulties, however, were encountered in the administration of the public school system in the newly settled districts along the northern and eastern frontiers of Manitoba. These were the years of the great immigration into the West, a great part of which came from east central Europe. In 1897 the three language groups of Manitoba were English, French and German; a fourth, the Icelandic, accepted public education in English while maintaining the mother tongue in the home and Icelandic press. By 1911, many other groups had been added, of which two, the Polish and the Ukrainian, were devoted to the maintenance of their native languages.²⁰ Moreover, of these groups the Poles and many of the Germans were Roman Catholics and to them the ministrations of the Church, led by Archbishop Langevin of St. Boniface, were naturally extended. The Ukrainians were mainly Greek Catholics. They had come without their native clergy and they therefore invited evangelisation by both the Protestant churches and the Church of Rome.

The great immigration, and the still active resentment of the Catholic clergy and of the lay leaders of the Manitoban French towards the school law, led to an increased emphasis on the bi-lingual provision of the school law. They also perpetuated the denominational hostility which had done so much to provoke the School Act of 1890. The French of course insisted on their right to instruction in the mother tongue; the Germans, both the Old Colony Mennonites and newcomers did so too; the Poles and Ukrainians soon learned, from the politicians not least, to do the same. The result was to

¹⁹The provincial premier after 1900, R. P. Roblin, had opposed both the School Act of 1890 and the amendment of 1897; the Conservative platform of 1899 had called for the freeing of the school systems "from party politics by the establishment of an independent board of education"; P.A.M., Pamphlets, *Record of the Roblin Government, 1900-1909*, 5.

²⁰The composition of the population of Manitoba in 1911 was as follows: British, 266,415; French, 30,944; German, 34,530; Austro-Hungarian, 39,665; Polish, 12,310; Scandinavian, 16,419; and smaller groups, to a total of 55,311; *Canada Year Book 1912*, 24.

demonstrate that, under the new conditions, the bi-lingual system of 1897 was unworkable.¹⁴

As if these difficulties were not sufficiently harmful, there was also the lack of a school-attendance law. The lack had engaged the attention of the Roblin Government in 1900. It then and later, on legal advice, accepted the view that a compulsory attendance law would violate the constitutional rights of Catholics to separate private schools and re-open the school question. Accordingly, the administration decided to achieve its object by way of police legislation, rather than by altering the school law. In 1909 it amended the Children's Act.¹⁵ The defects of this legislation were that delinquency had to be proved before children could be compelled to attend school. When the Act was tightened in 1914, however, and the Department of Education directed enforcement through its own truancy officers, the average school attendance in the Province began to rise. The advantages of central administration overcame the defects of the law.

Because of these difficulties and deficiencies, the school administration of the Roblin Government came under ever sharpening criticism, and the Liberal opposition made the most of the Government's embarrassment. The criticism from English Protestants was intensified by the passage of the ambiguous Coldwell amendments of 1912. These amendments, which seemed to permit the separation of Protestant and Catholic children in the larger schools, had coincided with the extension of Manitoba's boundaries, and with them of the jurisdiction of the School Act. Whatever the meaning of the amendments, they aroused strong resentment among the Orangemen of Manitoba.¹⁶ The provincial Liberals, who had campaigned for reform of the school system in 1910, in 1914 included in their platform pledges to maintain unimpaired the national school system of 1897. They proposed to provide educational facilities for all children in the Province and to make adequate teaching of English obligatory in all public schools. In a carefully drawn plank the party undertook "to provide for a measure of compulsory education, which, while respecting the personal rights and religious convictions of the individual, shall make it obligatory on parents and guardians of all children that such children shall receive a proper elementary education, *either by attendance at the public schools, or by such substitute within the choice of*

¹⁴For an informed contemporary description of the operation of the bi-lingual section, see C. B. Sissons, *Bi-lingual Schools in Canada* (Toronto, 1917) pp. 116-155. See also R. Fletcher, "The Language Problem in Manitoba Schools," *papers read before Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba* III (6) (Winnipeg, 1851) 55-56. Dr. Fletcher was a member of the Department of Education from 1903, and Deputy-Minister of Education, 1908-1939.

¹⁵This account is based on the defence of the government policy by Premier Roblin and the Minister of Education, Hon. George Coldwell, in moving amendments of the Truancy Act in 1914; P.A.M., *Manitoba Debates*, 1915 (T.) 72.

¹⁶*Canada, H. of C. Debates*, 1911-12, III, 4839-4925 and 4934-4973. No direct connection between the boundary extension of 1912 and the amendments has, to the writer's knowledge, ever been established. But that the amendments were a fumbling attempt to conciliate Catholic feeling without arousing Protestant resentment seems probable; see A. G. Morice, *Vie de Monseigneur Langevin*, pp. 284-285. In further confirmation of this assumption, it is of interest to know that the amendments were drafted outside the Province of Manitoba.

the parents as shall attain this end." The party also pledged itself to increase the provincial grants to rural schools, and repeal the Coldwell amendments. They thus undertook to make the system of 1897 work, and at the same time they hoped to evade the constitutional difficulty with respect to compulsory attendance by allowing parents a substitute acceptable to the Department of Education." The religious rights of Catholic parents were to be respected; but there was no suggestion of compromise on the principle of duality.

IV.

The Liberal party failed to win the election of 1914, but came to power in 1915 when the Roblin Government fell for reasons unconnected with the administration of education. The new government of Premier T. C. Norris was emphatically a reform administration and in the Minister of Education, Dr. R. S. Thornton, possessed an administrator of clear purpose and unflinching will. A school-attendance act, correcting the existing anomalous situation, was carried through the legislature in the session of 1916 without opposition.¹⁸ The bill to repeal the bi-lingual section, No. 258, of the Public School Act, however, provoked bitter opposition from the French-speaking members, and the only Ukrainian member, of the Legislature. It was, in fact, the only measure introduced by the government during the session which led to a division in the legislature. The bitterness expressed by the French members was natural enough. The Liberal Party, in its platform of 1914 and during the election campaigns had committed itself only to the enforcement of adequate instruction in English thereby implying the retention of the principle of the bi-lingual system and the use of administrative methods to improve English language teaching. Now the party proposed to do away with the whole principle of bi-lingual instruction.

In moving the deletion of the bi-lingual clause from the School Act the Minister of Education explained that until the autumn of 1915, he had hoped to achieve the purpose of the government, that is, to enforce adequate instruction in English, by administrative means. That hope had been defeated by the mandatory character of the legislation of 1897, the conditions revealed by a special report on the bi-lingual schools, and by an increase in the petitions for bi-lingual teaching. The problem had ceased to be, as in 1897, a peripheral one; one quarter of the schools with one sixth of the enrolment were bi-lingual in 1915. The Deputy-Minister, Robert Fletcher, had reported that the situation was nearly out of hand. In short, it had been proved to the Minister's satisfaction that adequate instruction in English could be provided only by making English the sole language of instruction.¹⁹

Over and above these administrative considerations, it is to be noted, there were the mounting racial sentiment of the war years and the effect of the powerful and sustained campaign by the *Manitoba*

¹⁸P.A.M., Pamphlets, *Liberal Platform of 1914*. (Saint-Boniface, 1919). The legal thought behind the substitute clause was later expounded by Attorney-General A. B. Hudson, subsequently a member of the Supreme Court of Canada, P.A.M., *Manitoba Debates*, (F.P.) 1916, 28.

¹⁹Much of the benefit of this act was, however, lost by placing its administration in the hands of local officials.

²⁰P.A.M., *Manitoba Debates*, (F.P.) 1916, 5-7.

Free Press against the bi-lingual system. And it is to be remembered that the dispute in Ontario over Regulation 17 was at its height, that Bourassa had forced Laurier to take up the cause of Nationalism in Quebec, and that the conscription issue was looming.

The Minister convinced his colleagues of the need for legislation but to convince the caucus of his party was more difficult. The meeting, which considered the proposed change of policy lasted until the small hours. Influential leaders sought to preserve for the French language a status similar to that which it possessed in Saskatchewan. It was reported that the French members refused to accept the concession of instruction in French as well as English, but demanded the re-establishment of separate schools as of 1889. Compromise was impossible, and Thornton's proposal was adopted.²⁰ The two French Liberal members, P. A. Talbot and J. P. Dumas, then broke with the Liberal party.

The grounds of opposition were manifest and were debated at length in the Legislature. The French members of the Legislature, both Liberal and Conservative, declared that the rights of the French had been betrayed by the Liberal party. That party had pledged itself to maintain the compromise of 1897. In office it spurned its public and unequivocal undertakings. The Premier himself, it was charged, had given pledges, both in writing and in speech, that the rights of the French would be respected. The charges were met fairly by Norris and Thornton, but the bitter sense of betrayal felt by the French members drove them on to assert the whole claim of their people, their historical, moral and constitutional right to have denominational schools and to have equality of the French language with English; to assert, in short, the principle of duality. "If any single member expects the English to assimilate the French in this Dominion," said Talbot, "I might give them the friendly advice to disabuse themselves [*sic.*]. The French are a distinctive race, and we will not be assimilated, whether you like it or not. The sooner you know it the better. We have been given our rights as a separate nationality and we will hold them."²¹ The bill, the French members declared, was a violation of the "pact", or "treaty" of Confederation, which had recognized the equal and distinct status of the French in Canada. "The French and Catholic population of Manitoba," declared a protest prepared by a committee of the Manitoban French and tabled in the Legislature "have by natural law, by the title of first occupancy, by solemn treaties, by the B.N.A. Act, by the pact solemnly entered into by the Delegates of the Territory of Assiniboia and the North-West Territories with the Dominion of Canada, by the Manitoba Act and subsequent legislation, rights and privileges which have been violated by the Legislature of Manitoba."²² To the embittered and bewildered French, the bill was "an attempt on our national life".²³

²⁰The reports of this caucus are, as is usual, meagre. P.A.M., *Manitoba Debates*, (F.P.) 1916, pp. 44-45. The substance of the Reports is accepted here, because it is supported by the subsequent debates.

²¹P.A.M., *Manitoba Debates* (F.P.) 1916, 31. Talbot was reproached in the debate with being a "nationalist" and a "separatist", but denied that he was a Nationalist of Bourassa's school. He was, in fact, at that time a Laurier Liberal.

²²*Canadian Annual Review*, 1916, 673.

²³*Ibid.*, 1921, 774.

The reply of the government was that the French language had no constitutional standing in Manitoba. The religious rights of Roman Catholics were not touched, were indeed not involved. Some members, and the local press, admitted the special status, on historical and moral grounds, of the French language. But there was no obligation, it was asserted, to respect that status, as the French had neither accepted the Compromise of 1897 nor an offer of special treatment.²⁴ By standing out for their whole claim, based on natural law and the constitution, and for the retention of the bi-lingual system of 1897, they had identified themselves with the other language groups, the Germans, Ukrainians and Poles and menaced the Legislature with the re-opening of the school question in its entirety. By their refusal to compromise, the French of Manitoba had brought down on their cause the fate preparing for the other non-English languages.²⁵ As J. D. Baskerville reminded the Legislature, "the battle at Babel had broken the contract".²⁶ The reply of the government and its supporters was made, not unsympathetically but very firmly; for the general conviction in the Legislature was that the operation of the bi-lingual clause had threatened the very foundations of Canadian nationality in Manitoba. It was imperative that the danger be removed, "if a common citizenship were to be built up in Canada".²⁷

Immigration into the West had introduced a third element into the crucible, a third element which by 1916 had affected both the distinct and formed nationalities of 1870. Because the newcomers were assimilated to the English group, the influx reduced the French to a minority and led to the loss of the rights held by them from 1870 to 1890. It also affected the English group by the insistence of many of the immigrants both on assimilation to the English group in public life and on the retention of their mother tongue and culture in private life. In this trend the Icelandic and Scandinavian peoples led. Both the Icelandic members of the Legislature in 1916 supported the abolition of bi-lingual teaching and one of them, Hon. T. H. Johnson, declared: "We admit, and we all must admit, that there is only one nationality possible in the future, a Canadian nationality, and we claim the privilege of becoming merged in that, and the privilege of contributing towards that, whatever national characteristics we may possess."²⁸ While rejecting the principle of duality, Manitoba, out of the confusion created by the bi-lingual clause and the great immigration, was groping towards a combination of political uniformity with cultural plurality.

In the end the abolition of the bi-lingual system was carried by thirty-eight votes to eight. The opposition was made up of two dissident French Liberals, one Ukrainian member, and the Conservative Opposition of five, of whom two were French speaking. The decisive character of the vote settled the issue. Although opposition flared up briefly in 1917 when the Government proposed to make the

²⁴*Ibid.*, 8, 46-47, 49-51, 53-55; also *Manitoba Debates*, (F.P.) 1920, p. 46, in which A. B. Hudson reviewed the controversy; ". . . it seemed to him what had been done was the only thing that could be done."

²⁵*Winnipeg Free Press Library*, Dafoe Papers, J. W. Dafoe to Thomas Goté, Apr. 6, 1916.

²⁶P.A.M., *Manitoba Debates*, (F.P.) 1916, p. 53.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 55.

University of Manitoba a state university, the year 1916 witnessed the end of political controversy over the school question in the province of Manitoba.

V.

The legislation of 1916 was enforced with both firmness and tact²⁷. But the Liberal party of Manitoba had to pay the penalty for its courage in grasping the nettle. In 1920 it lost its majority to candidates of the United Farmers and to opponents of the school legislation of 1916²⁸. In 1922 its defeat was completed by the same forces. The fusion of the United Farmers with the opponents of the school legislation did not lead to any change in the school system. The Liberal leader might argue that the combination was a revenge for 1916, but Premier John Bracken made it clear that no one had ever suggested to him any change in the school system as the price of support.²⁹ Bracken's statement was never challenged in the debates. It seems clear that once the personalities of 1916 were removed from public office, the school question was a closed issue as far as the political parties of Manitoba were concerned.

²⁷P.A.M., Pamphlets, *Addresses in the Legislature by Hon. R. S. Thornton* 1917 to 1919. (Dept. of Education, Winnipeg, 1917, 1918, 1919. See also P.A.M., *Manitoba Debates, (F.P.)* 1921 pp. 83-89; *Ibid.*, 1917, 9; *Ibid.*, 1920, 30. I am told on good authority that it was Dr. Thornton who coined the term, "New Canadian".

²⁸Dafoc Papers, J. W. Dafoc to Clifford Sifton, Dec. 29, 1920; *Canadian Annual Review*, 1921, 739; *Manitoba Free Press*, Feb. 25, 1921, p. 13.

²⁹The Farmers' Platform of 1922 merely called for stricter enforcement of attendance, but made no reference to language instruction.