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The Contribution of Separate Schools to the Development of Saskatchewan: 1870 to the Present

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The premise of this paper is that the development of separate schools offers an important point of view on the history of Saskatchewan. It is an historical fact that up until the Great Depression these schools were the centre of a continuing social and political controversy. It has been nearly a hundred years since schools were first established in Saskatchewan; in fact, they existed long before there was a province. Prior to the Northwest Rebellion of 1885, the birth pain of the Canadian West, the region was mostly an uninhabited wilderness. Until the great immigration floods of the 1890's, the only educational force at work in the West was the famous religious order, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (O.M.I.), whose more redoubtable members included Bishop Taché, Bishop Grandin, Father Leduc and Father Lacombe. These hard-working missionaries had come to Western Canada in the mid 1800's and with the fur trade companies they provided the advance guard for civilization in the Canadian West during the last half of the nineteenth century. The Oblates were a hardy group dedicated not only to saving the souls of the Indian and Metis of the territories, but also concerned with establishing training schools to help the Indian and Metis cope with the advancing civilization. In Saskatchewan, these were located in places such as Ile-à-la-Crosse, Cumberland House, Fort Carleton and Lebret in the Qu'Appelle Valley. Farming and carpentry were usually part of the "practical" curriculum.

Schools were established by law in the Northwest Territories Act of 1875, which set up a federally-administered territorial government for the geographical area which had been obtained from the Hudson Bay Company. Minority religious schools were anticipated, using as a model the system which then existed in Quebec and Ontario. However, it was not until 1884 and again in

1886 that the Territorial Council passed ordinances to effect the organization of local school districts. The legal framework for separate schools within the territories has been well-documented in books by Weir,[1] Sisson,[2] Lupul[3] and others, and in theses by researchers such as Langley,[4] Goldade[5] and Fenske.[6]

Originally, the intent of the legislation was to establish a dual system similar to that in Quebec, but subsequent ordinances modified the legislation until it resembled more closely that of Ontario. The primary difference was that the Quebec system had a dual system were Catholics and Protestants had parallel school systems. In Ontario the concept of a minority school was introduced. Until 1905, the powers of education were vested in a board called, at different times, the Board of Education, the Council of Public Instruction, or the Education Council. Membership on the board varied from time to time, although it was always composed of two sections, Roman Catholic and Protestant, which originally had equal representation. Through legislation the Roman Catholic representation was reduced to a minority which diminished their control over educational decisions in the territory. Of particular concern for the appointed education board was the licensing of teachers, selection of textbooks, setting the school year and examinations. The board also spelled out the procedures for organizing school districts, a power which directly affected separate schools. One of the most significant ordinances was passed in 1886.

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1 George M. Went, *The Separate School Question in Canada*, Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1934.

2 Charles B. SISSONS, *Church and State in Canadian Education,* Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1959.

3 Manoly R. LUPUL, *The Roman Catholic Church and the North-West School Question,* Toronto: The University of Toronto, 1974.

4 G.J. LANGLEY, "Saskatchewan's Separate School System. A Study of One Pattern of Adjustment for the Problem of Education in a Multi-Religion Democratic Society." Unpublished doctoral thesis. New York: Columbia University, 1951.

5 Larry S. GOLDALE, "Saskatchewan Separate Schools: A Struggle for Equality." Unpublished Master's thesis. Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1977, pp. 51-54.

6 Milton R. FENSKE, "The Evolution of the Formal Structure of Separate Schools on the Prairie Provinces." Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. University of Alberta, 1968.

It determined that a publicly supported religious minority school district might be established coterminously with an existing public school district. Once this principle was firmly established in law and practice, separate schools became an integral part of the social and cultural development of the province. At the same time, the concept of a minority school system was reinforced and the opportunity for a dual system was eliminated. Another important aspect of this legislation was a clause which permitted the teaching of religion in classes in the last half hour of the day.

By the late 1880's, residents of the Canadian Northwest began to take advantage of the opportunity to set up publicly supported school districts. The annual report of the Territorial Council in 1886 notes that twenty Catholic, Public and Separate schools existed at that time.[7] It is unclear how many private schools were in operation, but it is likely that there were a number of Oblate missions which included residential schools. The designation of schools as public or separate caused some confusion and thus many of the schools originally designated as "public" should have been called "separate" and vice versa. As time passed and the term separate took on a strict legal definition, it was important that a school district be properly named. Of the Catholic schools reported in 1886, seven were in the Prince Albert district and four were in Assiniboia Territory – all near Wapella.[8] After 1886, the Territorial Council required school districts to follow the ordinance which clearly defined separate schools so that by 1900 the confusion over the naming of separate and public schools was eliminated. Events many years later, particularly the so-called garb and symbol legislation of 1930, made the actual name of the school district very important.

The separate schools established in the Northwest Territories prior to 1905 represent some of the oldest institutions now existing in Saskatchewan. However, not all of the school districts set up in territorial days survived to the present, as was exemplified by the schools near Wapella. Benbecula, St. Mary's, St. Margaret's and St. Peter's were four small Catholic Separate School districts established near Wapella in 1886-87. The district was settled by a colony of Scottish crofters and ministered to by Father David Gillies. It is

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7 North-West Territories, Board of Education Annual Report, 1886.

8 *Ibid.*

ironic that some of the first separate schools in Saskatchewan, which were later to be the subject of much anti-French and anti-German feeling, were established by English-speaking settlers from Britain!

Although the Wapella schools did not survive into the twentieth century, two other separate school districts, at Battleford and Prince Albert, have persevered until modern times. Both of those communities have historical significance as the sites of early settlements and as the locations of significant developments during the Northwest Rebellion in 1885. The school in Prince Albert had been set up by Father Domeau as a mission school in 1883.[9] Four years later the Catholics of Prince Albert established a publicly supported separate school in accordance with the 1886 territorial ordinance. About the same time, a Catholic school was established in the town of Battleford. Shortly thereafter, two more separate schools were established near Qu'Appelle and Prince Albert, although neither managed to last more than a few years. The separate school district set up in Regina in 1899 did survive and continued to grow to become the largest in the province. Several important separate school legal decisions came out of conflicts in Graton R.C.S.S.D. #13 in Regina, including the Bartz case, which established that members of a minority faith must, by law, support a minority school district where such a district existed.[10]

A discussion of education in Western Canada in the 1890's would be incomplete without at least a mention of the Manitoba School Question. Originally the result of a provincial law dealing with separate schools, the Manitoba School Question became a national constitutional crisis that helped defeat at least one federal government.

The territorial days ended when the Saskatchewan Act was passed in 1905, and it was clear that separate schools were to remain part of the educational institutions of the province. In fact, most of the territorial ordinances regarding education were written directly into the new act as school law. This is not to say that separate schools were easily accepted as a matter of course by all interested parties. In his book *The Roman Catholic Church and the*

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[9] W.T.S. HOOPER and R.J. FOURNIER, *Early Education in Prince Albert,* (no publisher, no date).

[10] WEIR, *ibid*., pp. 78-81.

North West School Question, Lupul has described much of the debate and intrigue which preceded the passage of the act.[11] The separate school clauses were among the most contentious issues in the long autonomy debate in Parliament. The first provincial election in 1905 confirmed that religion and separate schools were to remain as important issues in Saskatchewan's political development. The election campaign between F.W.G. Haultain of the Provincial Rights Party and Walter Scott of the Liberals was a determined one, with the Liberals winning a somewhat surprising victory. The Roman Catholic Church hierarchy became involved in the campaign when Archbishop Langevin of St. Boniface was said to have circulated a letter encouraging Catholics to support the Liberals, a party which seemed to be more predisposed to the continued growth of separate schools.[12]

Although the first provincial election foreshadowed a continuing debate over separate schools, the first few years after 1905 brought a rapid, though not uncontroversial, increase in the number of all school districts. The number of separate schools nearly doubled from seven to thirteen, although public school districts increased nearly three times to a total of 2,270 students.[13] The federal Liberal government immigration policies had encouraged settlement of the West and the establishment of schools demonstrated one aspect of the growth and development of the West. In the first year after the election, separate schools were organized at Wolseley, North Battleford and Humboldt. The former two were uneventful; the latter evoked some animosity in the community.[14] The Humboldt Catholic community grew so quickly that it soon became a majority of the population in the school district. Thus there existed a separate (i.e. minority) school which was, in fact, supported by a majority of the ratepayers, a situation apparently not anticipated in the legislation.

A few months later, a separate school was established in the German Catholic community of Lemberg. There was apparently some ill-feeling in the district and the Weissenberg R.C.S.S.D. #17

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11 LUPUL, *ibid.*

12 D.H. BOCKING, "The First Provincial Election," *Saskatchewan History,* Vol. XVII, No. 1, pp. 46-47.

13 LANGLEY, *ibid.*, p. 126.

14 Files of the Department of Education, Humboldt R.C.S.S.D. #15.

suffered through a plague-like series of problems during its first twenty years. Tax rolls, attendance, trustee disputes, teacher problems and a missing land title led to a continuous set of difficult circumstances for the trustees of the school district and the Department of Education. At one point, an evidently exasperated government official wrote to the district stating that he hoped ". . . that your school board will conduct the business as far as possible in accordance with the law so as to avoid any further friction with the Public School District."[15]

Without doubt, tax assessment and other financial issues were the most common problems facing separate schools in the first years after 1905. A particular problem was obtaining funds from the local tax collection officer since most school districts were established without regard to the fact that once tax rolls are set for a year they could not be altered. Tax assessment created the first full-scale provincial argument over separate schools. In 1909, a separate school had been established at Vonda and two years later at a Court of Revision several Catholics asked to have their taxes switched to the Public School. Judge McLorg allowed the switch, but the Separate School District protested that this would mean financial ruin and, beyond that, it was against the spirit of minority school legislation. Ultimately, the school district was proven right, but not before considerable debate had begun on the pros and cons of free choice in the allocation of property taxes. The Vonda case and the Bartz case (previously mentioned) helped determine that assessment of taxes was to be based on the faith of the ratepayer, not on his personal preference. Many people felt this was an unfortunate infringement upon individual rights and the phrase "faith-test" became a slogan for those who opposed separate schools on the grounds of religious faith. As a footnote to history, it is interesting that the role of one's religion was only recently modified in the assignment of taxes. Today one merely designates tax support as a public school supporter or as a separate school supporter.

Despite the court cases and legal wrangles, the organization of separate schools proceeded apace until the First World War. Between 1910 and 1912, separate schools were established in such disparate communities as Windthorst, Grayson, Watson, Marquis,

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[15] Files of the Department of Education, Wessenberg R.C.S.S.D. #17.

Saskatoon, Moose Jaw and Melville. The school at Grayson raised a thorny issue for Department of Education officials. Some petitions for separate schools were being submitted from communities where there was not an obvious religious minority. In Grayson, for example, the first ratepayer count revealed a Catholic minority of one (out of fifty-nine). Since the Department of Education was reluctant to establish a separate school for a group which was not a significantly minority, an official count was made. The Department's reluctance was well-founded since the Grayson Separate School soon became the majority district and the public school was closed down. In other, larger communities such as Saskatoon, Moose Jaw and Melville, separate school districts were also established but with a considerably smaller proportion of tax-payer support than in smaller but heavily Catholic communities like Grayson or Humboldt.

During the war years (1914-1918) the French language became an issue which affected the political development of the province and related directly to the existence of separate schools. The war in Europe increased the sense of nationalism in Canada which was translated into a kind of pro-English fervour. Several groups, including the Presbyterian Synod and the Loyal Orange Lodge, lobbied actively against separate schools. The Orange Lodge in particular held a very extreme position against separate schools and in a book published in 1918 the Lodge presented a case for the outright abolition of denominational schools.[16] Considerable pressure was placed on Premier Scott (who was also Education Minister) to eliminate separate schools through various forms of lobbying or other delegations.[17] At one point, the separate school issue even became the subject of a long and uncomfortable debate between the Premier and his church minister, the Reverend Mackinnon.[18]

At the same time, other forces were lobbying against the use of

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[16] W.G. ARMSTRONG, *Separate Schools,* An Introduction of the Dual System into Eastern Canada and Its Subsequent Extension to the West. Published by authority of the Provincial Grand Orange Lodge of Saskatchewan, Weyburn, 1918.

[17] WEIR, *ibid.,* pp. 246-267.

[18] Raymond HULL, "Pastor vs. Politican: The Reverend Murdoch MacKinnon and Premier Walter Scott's Amendment to the School Act," *Saskatchewan History,* Vol. XXXII, Spring 1979, Saskatchewan Archives Board, pp. 61-73.

French in Saskatchewan schools. In fact, there was some evidence that French-speaking Catholics were taking advantage of separate school legislation to establish schools and thus hire teachers who might be more disposed toward the French culture. Separate schools in LaFlèche, Courval and Edam established between 1916 and 1919 to some degree were set up to encourage the French language. St. Charles R.C.S.S.D. #8 at Courval typifies the single-minded dedication of French-Catholics to maintain their schools. At times enrolment in the school dipped to only five students but the steadfast ratepayers refused to abandon their school or to unite with the local public school.

Part of the stubbornness of the French-speaking Catholics can be attributed to their adversaries who were propounding the abolition of both separate schools and the use of French in schools. The School Trustees' Convention in Saskatoon in 1918 marked a watershed for the French language issue. The trustees attempted to pass a motion limiting the use of French as a language of instruction, which was at that time permitted in Grade One. This precipitated a walkout by the minority groups at the convention (French-Catholic and German-Catholic trustees) and created a split in the trustee organization that was not repaired until 1951. The organization of the Edam Separate School District was attributed to the dispute at the convention.[19] A disenchanted French-speaking trustee returned home from the convention and immediately set out to establish a separate school.

Opposition to the French-Catholics in public education revived an issue long dormant in education politics – the Protestant Public School. In law Protestants, where they were a minority, had the same right to establish a separate school as Catholics. Nonetheless, by 1914 only two Protestant Separate Schools had been set up in Saskatchewan – one at Esterhazy, the other at Duck Lake where there was a large number of Catholics and a number of small Catholic Public Schools which were vestiges of the 1880's. Both Protestant Separate Schools had been established in 1890. With the rise of the French language controversy, a number of communities registered a protest by establishing Protestant Separate Schools. The first and most controversial was in 1914 at Forget, where the Protestant petitioners objected to the public (i.e. Catholic) school

[19] Files of the Department of Education, Edam R.C.S.S.D. #9.

which was taught by nuns in religious clothing and bore "crosses" on the walls. The same year a similar complaint was received about Sitkala School at Willowbunch, but Premier Scott exercised his considerable political powers and effected a compromise between the disputing factions in the community. Four years later at Storthoaks, a petition for a separate school stated that the local public school was ". . . purely FrenchCatholic (and) ... does not deserve any co-operation from us."[20] This feeling was typical of many small communities in the province.

The volatile nature of the separate school question was also recognized by a Dr. H. Foght, an educational expert from the U.S.A. who was commissioned to do a major report on education in Saskatchewan in 1918. In the report, Dr. Foght only briefly mentioned separate schools – one short chapter. He, too, realized that separate schools were at that time largely a political question and not likely to be influenced by an expert from South of the border.

A number of other Protestant Separate Schools were established over the next decade or so. The separate schools in Wakaw, Allan, Kermaria, Holdfast and Quinton were organized between 1923 and 1927. The most common complaint against the Catholic Public Schools was that the school board was usually dominated by a Catholic majority and often hired nuns as teachers. The same complaints surfaced again in the 1930's and 40's when Protestant Separate Schools were set up at Prelate, Lesieux, Coderre and Mendham. G.J. Langley, who has studied the history of education in Saskatchewan, states that these schools were ". . . emphatic that the Roman Catholic majority in their district had elected a school board which engaged members of a religious order to teach in the Public School and the Protestant minority did not want to have their children taught by a member of a religious order."[21] Most of these Protestant Separate Schools have now been disorganized or amalgamated with a larger unit. The issue of teaching nuns had become a provincial concern in 1930 when the newly-elected Conservative government passed the so-called "garb and symbol" legislation in an apparent response to the problems experienced by non-Catholic ratepayers in Catholic-dominated school districts.

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[20] Files of the Department of Education, Storthoaks P.S.S.D. #2.

[21] LANGLEY, *ibid.*, p. 130.

The law forbade the wearing of religious clothing by teachers in a public school.

The 1920's brought a new set of problems to the developing province. The population was growing rapidly, technological advances such as cars, radio, and movies brought a new way of life to the province. The Twenties were also a time of social problems on the prairie, including prohibition, fundamentalist religion and, again, separate schools. The French language question persisted and other anti-separate school groups emerged, including an organized series of petitions called the Anti-Separate School League. Meanwhile, the number of separate schools grew steadily with new districts at Meyronne, Swift Current, Radville, Viscount and Verwood, all of which involved a significant French-speaking population. Before the end of the 1920's, separate schools had been set up at Biggar, Rosetown and Stockholm. The school in Stockholm was particularly significant since it was a largely Hungarian community which at first rejected the concept of a Catholic Separate School, preferring instead to encourage complete integration through a public school. Eventually, however, a separate school was established in 1925. The point-of-view of Eastern European Catholics on separate schools is of historical interest. For many years, Eastern European Catholics generally rejected the idea of separate schools. This led in some communities, to considerable discussion and, in some situations, a legal opinion was needed to determine to whom it was that the term "Catholic" applied in the spirit of the separate school legislation. Legal opinions in Melville and North Battleford seem to agree that a Catholic is one who believes the Pope is the supreme religious authority – at least for the purposes of separate schools.

A discussion of Saskatchewan in the 1920's would be incomplete without mention of the Ku Klux Klan and the Conservative election win in 1929. Because this is a well-studied issue in Saskatchewan history, suffice it to say here that separate schools were of major concern with both groups. The Ku Klux Klan rose rapidly (and disappeared rapidly) in Saskatchewan in 1927-28, using as one of its slogans "one nation, one flag, one language, one school." It explicitly opposed separate schools. The Conservatives, under Premier J.T.M. Anderson, a former educator, attempted the complete integration of all new Canadians in the school system. The legislation eliminating the use of French as a language of

instruction and the "garb and symbol" legislation are manifestations of the direction the Conservatives wished to see Saskatchewan society proceed. The Great Depression, which coincidentally followed the Conservatives, did more than any political party to affect life in Saskatchewan society. Since the Second World War followed the Great Depression, school issues faded for a time from the Saskatchewan political scene.

The most significant social and political event in Saskatchewan after the World War II was the election of the C.C.F. Party. The C.C.F. implemented a policy of consolidation of the small rural school districts. By 1944, over 5,000 such school districts (mostly one-school rural districts) existed and the trend toward modernization called for a more efficient system of larger units of administration. Thus it was that one of the most significant pieces of legislation was the Larger School Units Act. For the most part, this legislation was not relevent to separate schools, though it did make consolidation virtually impossible for such schools.

Interestingly, an era of significant growth for separate schools has been since 1950. Only the years 1906-19 can be compared with the years of rapid expansion between 1950 and 1962. Fifteen separate school districts were set up during those twelve years. Some were in larger communities such as Yorkton, Weyburn, Estevan and Lloydminster; others were in small towns such as Mankota and Wilcox. Usually the separate school was a response to population growth. The post-war baby boom greatly strained existing educational facilities and one response to providing new schools was for the Catholics to provide a separate school. The 1960's brought separate high schools for the first time, since the Secondary School Act of 1907 permitted public high schools only. In the 1970's, declining enrolments have placed extra financial burdens on separate school supporters because inevitably smaller schools are more expensive to operate than larger ones.

The increase in the numbers of separate school districts in the last thirty years has established firmly the existence of separate schools in Saskatchewan society. Schools have always been of utmost concern to the people of the province; separate schools have provided a rallying point for minority rights, an opportunity for the expression of freedom and the democratic exercise of control over a most important issue – the education of young minds!