

Perren Baker and Alberta's School District Reorganization

L. J. (Roy) Wilson
medicine hat college

C'est en 1935, que le gouvernement de l'Alberta qui avait à sa tête monsieur William Aberhart, adopta une loi selon laquelle on regrouperait, pour chacune des régions rurales, des centaines de petites écoles sous une administration plus centralisée. Cette loi n'était que l'aboutissement des réformes qu'en vain le ministre de l'éducation, monsieur Perren E. Baker du gouvernement précédent (United Farmers of Alberta) avait tenté d'instaurer; en effet, c'est entre 1928 et 1930 que monsieur Baker avait présenté à l'assemblée législative un projet de loi qui se proposait de créer, pour l'ensemble du territoire rural, vingt régions administratives, coiffées chacune d'un conseil de cinq membres, tout en conservant, au niveau local, les instances administratives. Malheureusement, le nombre et la force des opposants au projet de loi obligea monsieur Baker à retirer son projet avant la lecture finale. En 1935, le gouvernement des United Farmers of Alberta était défait; l'imposante victoire du Crédit social qu'avaient appuyé massivement les enseignants, ouvrait la voie à une réorganisation du système scolaire dans la province.

INTRODUCTION

In 1935 the Government of Alberta moved to organize its hundreds of small rural school districts into large school units, supposedly to improve the efficiency of the provincial education system. With this dramatic innovation, Alberta became an educational leader among provinces in the country.

The Social Credit government of William Aberhart is given the credit for this important educational legislation. It is true that Aberhart, as the province's Minister of Education, promoted the legislation and guided it through the provincial legislature. But it is incorrect to believe that the people of Alberta had not been exposed to these ideas for educational change. Rather, it was Perren Earle Baker, Minister of Education during the 14 years in which the United Farmers of Alberta political party formed the government, who as a provincial political leader proposed the large unit for school districts in Alberta. During the final years of his long ministry, 1921–1935, Baker attempted to win support for his idea. Speaking before farmer conventions, addressing the school trustees of the province, and debating on the floor of the Alberta Legislature, Baker promoted the idea of reorganization. It was, he believed, the one innovation which would do

most for the existing school systems. And, although Perren Baker was unsuccessful in winning mass support for his reform, it can be said that his propagandizing managed to plant the reform idea in the minds of many. If anything, Baker's efforts on behalf of the large school unit scheme gained support from a large sector of the society. With Aberhart's assumption of political power in 1935, the momentum for educational change was already underway.

The years which marked the ascendancy of organized farmers as a political force throughout Canada were significant ones for the country. Shortly after World War I the urban population in Canada had climbed to a point where it equalled that of the rural, thus marking the beginning of the end for agriculture as the prime industry of Canada. Rapid industrialization, following the initial post-war slump, was to bring work opportunities and material prosperity to the growing towns and cities. As well, technology and expertise were now able to supply a wide array of health, educational, and leisure possibilities to many of the country's population.

Unfortunately, the rural citizens of the country were not experiencing the same exhilarating possibilities as their urban counterparts. Climatic conditions, fluctuating prices for agricultural products, and inefficient delivery systems, coupled with ever-increasing prices for manufactured goods and capital equipment, made farming at best a risky business during the 1920s. To add to this, the prairie West was at a point in its development where the farm population was relatively isolated from the mainstream of progress being experienced in the urban sector. Roads were only seasonally passable, mail service was often sporadic, and radio was still a luxury. Most serious, of course, was the condition of the rural school. Teachers hired to staff the one-room schools spread across the prairies were immature, poorly prepared, and transient. The poorer regions on the prairies, in some cases severely depopulated during the course of the war, were unable to raise a sufficient assessment to support a school operating for a full term. As well, it seemed impossible to find enough dedicated trustees to govern the hundreds of minute rural school districts. Trustees were often lax in tax collection or irresponsible in the management of what school funds there were. Such was the sad state of elementary schooling. Secondary schooling was practically non-existent.

It was this grim picture which faced the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) when elected in their dramatic victory of 1921. The new Minister of Education, Perren Baker, a successful farmer from southeastern Alberta, holder of baccalaureate and master's degrees, undertook the important task of upgrading the rural educational system of his province. By the end of his long ministry he saw all necessary change resting on one key proposition: the reorganization of the province into large school divisions.

THE BAKER PLAN FOR THE LARGER UNIT

Alberta was not the only province in which pressure for educational change was prevalent, nor Canada the only country in turmoil over school reorganization. England, New Zealand, Australia, and several American states were experimenting successfully with large school districts. Steps towards unification had been taken in Alberta with the organization of consolidated schools, including rural consolidated high schools, but progress was too slow to meet the needs of the moment.

Since first assuming the education portfolio, Perren Baker had been giving close study to the problem of rural school administration. Some members of Mr. Baker's department had been at work promoting the larger school unit concept. As early as 1926 John Ross, the Deputy Minister, had written in his yearly report that the only satisfactory solution of the problem of providing a secondary education for rural youth was to organize rural high schools or establish municipal high schools. In the same year George Gorman, Chief Inspector of Schools, had called for school district reorganization when he spoke before the Alberta School Trustees' convention:

I do not see that we are going to reach any satisfactory solution of this problem of High School instruction for all until we can evolve a change in our type of unit of school administration. When the people are ready, and the time is not far distant, to accept responsibility for High School instruction in the same way that it is now accepted for public school instruction . . . we shall be on the way towards a solution. With its own limited means and powers . . . no individual rural district can ever properly meet our present day educational requirements. (1, p. 5)

On October 20, 1927, Mr. Baker presented a brief containing the results of his department's study on reorganization to the premier and cabinet. Educational progress in Alberta, the report stated, must proceed along two general lines: first, provision for full-time operation of sufficient schools, both primary and secondary; and second, improvement of the quality of teaching. Especially important, he claimed, was the steadily increasing demand for secondary education. The need must be met, Baker insisted, by developing a systematic plan for bringing these school services within reach of the entire school-age population of the province.

The second problem in education, the quality of the teacher, was perhaps the most important consideration. True to his times, Baker and his advisers believed that teachers of good character could be a force for moral good in the community. No good teacher, Mr. Baker maintained, could be expected to remain teaching in the country schools under existing conditions.

Only through school district reorganization could education in Alberta be improved. Baker set forth his proposals for the larger unit, and began the task of selling the idea to the people of the province. Two years later, in 1929, the Minister made the decision to bring legislation before

the Provincial Legislature to have his proposal for the large unit of school administration enacted. He also presented himself before Alberta's school trustees, in convention, to explain and defend his bill. The Baker Bill, as it came to be called, was based upon an important premise: that every child in Alberta was to have an equal opportunity for education, and that the burden of this undertaking was to be spread evenly throughout the province.

Next, Mr. Baker placed before the assembled trustees of Alberta several problems facing the educators of the province:

The educational opportunities offered are by no means equal. The schools do not all run full time. We have not yet developed any adequate system for providing high school education for the rural children and those of the small hamlets. The burden is very unevenly distributed even in the older portions of the province. . . . We have as teachers in the rural school so many beginners. The trustees complain that they no sooner get a capable teacher than she is gone. . . . There has been complaint of lack of supervision. There are too many misfits. (2, p. 89)

To meet these serious problems, significant changes in school organization were proposed. Mr. Baker announced that the entire rural school system would be reorganized, though the local district would remain as the basic administrative unit – an aspect which was eliminated when the Aberhart bill became law in 1935. In addition to the local school districts, other units or levels of administration would be formed: 150 such school districts could make up one large division, for a total of twenty rural divisions throughout the province. Together, these twenty large divisions were to be called the general taxing area, and an equalized educational tax would be applied over the whole province. The proposal for the general taxing area was highly controversial, and needed a strong defense. Baker argued from the premise that modern democratic society, in its complexity and interdependency, required schools for all the society's children. Hence, such provisions were a common responsibility, and the property of all citizens should be taxed to meet this need. The general taxing area would be governed by a board consisting of the chairmen of each of the twenty divisions, and would be responsible for providing equality of educational opportunity and for maintaining a reasonable salary schedule for all rural teachers.

The twenty divisional boards were each to consist of five members, all elected by the ratepayers. This board was to be responsible for engaging, supervising, and paying their teachers (in accordance with the schedule established by the general board). The work done by the teachers in each division was to be supervised by one superintendent in each division and his assistant, these officials to be hired and paid by the Department of Education. The local board would retain all of its present powers, except the hiring and paying of the teacher. All of these changes would result in little additional cost to the ratepayer if the Legislature accepted his bill.

Acceptance would give the Minister the power, set forth in part 16 of the bill, to constitute the necessary divisions by order, rather than by public consent.

These, then, were the proposals set before the trustees by the Minister. And what benefit would result from such changes? Mr. Baker was both confident and optimistic that the full-time operation of existing schools would result. As well, the more reasonable salary schedule, with increased opportunities for recognition and promotion, would serve to attract and hold the best teachers. Together, the rural school system would have the benefit of stability, he believed.

Unfortunately for Mr. Baker, the majority of delegates at the convention were not as happy with his plan as was he. At the termination of his address, pandemonium broke loose and reigned for several moments. Mr. Baker best describes the scene:

The official report of the trustees' convention utterly fails to reflect the wild tumult that broke out after I had spoken. Would be speakers, competing for the nod of the Chairman, gave up and shouted their various objections in a deafening chorus. The chairman, whose sole qualification for his position in such an emergency was a powerful voice, was quite unable to prevail over the din. In the intervals of comparative calm speeches were made but, for a time, anyone rising to oppose the majority was given short shrift. (3)

The angry objections to Mr. Baker's proposals were largely of three kinds. The first objection questioned the nature of the political state's responsibility in education, and the continuing centralization of power in this sphere. Mr. Baker maintained that education was a legitimate concern of the state since it is the state which taxes, and can thereby support the necessary institutions. In his important memorandum to the cabinet in 1927 Mr. Baker had set forth the justification for state involvement in education:

The local school district was the first crude machinery designed to put into effect the principle of the tax-supported school. It is a relic of the period of local option in education. Since that time the field of recognized state responsibility has greatly widened. In this province the state creates school districts when necessary, regardless of the opposition of the majority of the people involved. It prescribes the boundaries of the district, the location of the school site, the type of building. . . . It is submitted that the time has come when in the interest of justice and efficiency the Government of Alberta should go a step further and assume responsibility for the control and payment of our rural teachers. (4, p. 3)

Another objection raised to Mr. Baker's scheme was the claim made by several of the delegates that rural teachers, considering their training and experience, were already receiving sufficient salary, and further assistance to the teaching force was unjustifiable. One such opponent, a Mr. Clark, was opposed to the Baker Plan because he believed that a general board, such as the one proposed, would give teachers an unfair advantage over other occupational groups, such as stenographers, which was his example

(5, p. 99). A third objection concerned the additional cost of the new administrative model, especially as it would affect the older established school districts. That particular convention was composed mainly of representatives of the more well-to-do school districts, and they disagreed with sharing the cost of educating children from the poorer districts. Baker came to see that these trustees — little men who value little power, as he described them — were intransigent. (6)

The Alberta School Trustees' Convention opposed the new School Act, as did the Municipalities' Association, although both organizations were in opposition only to those clauses of the legislation, largely in Section XVI, which dealt with the formation of larger units for school administration. Nevertheless, the Minister proceeded to move the Bill into the legislature. His Bill was seconded, and strongly supported, by Minister without Portfolio, the Honorable Irene Parlby, a great booster for the legislation. In its clauses lay, she believed, the hope for rural education. Parlby saw the equalization of school opportunities and the diversification of education to be strong features of the legislation, and consistent with her agrarian ideology. The Bill encountered strong opposition in the House, especially the clause which would establish common taxation for the support of the schools. Mr. Baker did his utmost to persuade his opponents that his scheme recognized, as never before, the principle of provincial responsibility in education, as guaranteed by the constitution. The Loyal Opposition remained unmoved, and Mr. Baker finally withdrew his Bill before third reading.

The Baker Bill presented to the next sitting of the Legislature in 1930 contained several important changes. The previous provisions for a general taxing area and the creation of a general board, through which the divisions would co-operate in raising a general fund for the payment of teachers, was to be done by the board of each division, the money being raised by a common mill rate over the division. The province-wide scheme of taxation would be replaced by the tax levy within each division, the poorer districts being subsidized by grants from the provincial government, a concession in principle by Baker. He came to see that it was more reasonable that the assistance to poorer districts should come from the general revenue of the province rather than directly from the wealthy areas. Finally, the formation of the divisions depended upon a vote of the electorate, rather than being at the discretion of the Minister.

Through the debate in the 1930 session Mr. Baker carried himself courageously. He faced again the barrage of criticism from the opposite side of the House, but remained positive and clear in his attempts to clarify issues. Again and again, he spoke out on behalf of the small school districts:

What we have sought to do here is not to wipe out the local district, but to work out a scheme whereby we may get the advantages of the larger unit, without

destroying the local unit, which we must maintain. That has not been an easy problem. We purpose to do it, in the Bill, by retaining the local districts as they have existed since territorial days, but to group these districts, and have the ratepayers of the whole area elect one common board to perform certain functions which can best be performed by it — the divisional board. (7)

The Minister's labors on behalf of his legislation were not successful in appeasing the enemies of his plan, or in inspiring the reluctant premier and cabinet to force the bill through. Therefore, it was necessary to withdraw the Bill again before it entered committee and then third reading. Speaking to the withdrawal, Mr. Baker attempted to clarify and justify his action. Although he believed that his modified Bill had considerably more support than the legislation proposed the previous year, he concluded that the public at large should have an opportunity to consider the changes being proposed. He refused to be part of any attempt to force the principle of the large school unit upon the public.

RESPONSE AND REACTION

In his two attempts to have the Baker Bill made law, the Minister of Education came under relentless attack in the House from the leading spokesman of the Liberal and Conservative parties in Alberta. Hector Lang, BA, Liberal leader and MLA from Medicine Hat, had served as a school trustee and, from 1906 to 1913, as principal of Regina's Collegiate Institute. He took the position that the condition of rural education was not so serious as the Minister would have them believe. The restoration of the inspectorial staff to the level maintained by the former Liberal governments or to the level of the Saskatchewan government — 50 in 1927 — would solve most of the problems giving worry to Mr. Baker. Whatever was done, though, local control of educational affairs must be continued. To block the passage of the Baker Bill in 1929, Mr. Lang moved an amendment that the Bill not be read, since it was unsound in principle. He charged that this scheme would unjustifiably interfere with the local control and management of the rural schools, substitute a centralized system for the existing democratic system, greatly increase the administrative machinery, violate the principle of provincial responsibility in education, and make for an unfair distribution of maintenance costs.

The Conservative leader, A. A. McGillivray, after congratulating the Minister for the "courage of his conviction," opposed the abrogation of power at the local district boards and the transfer of that power into the hands of the Minister and the Department of Education, which would follow, he believed, from Baker's 1929 proposal. He could support a scheme of unified districts, but only if the districts retained complete autonomy in educational matters. Mr. Baker denied strongly the most important criticism brought against his proposal by the Opposition that session — that his Bill was undemocratic.

Mr. Baker's revamped Bill the next year came no closer to satisfying the Opposition. D. M. Duggan, MLA from Edmonton and the new Conservative leader, moved an amendment to the new Bill which would see a committee appointed to look at the whole problem of educational administration in rural Alberta. The new Liberal leader, J. T. Shaw, agreed in principle with the idea of a committee, but instead of just representatives from the Department of Education, the Alberta Teachers' Alliance (ATA) and the Alberta School Trustees' Association (ASTA) he would add a representative from the Department of Municipal Affairs and from each of the political parties represented in the Assembly. Mr. Baker was accused of making educational reform a political issue rather than something of concern to all, regardless of partisan bias. Citing Manitoba as an example, Lang showed that only one large division had been formed in over a decade of permissive legislation, perhaps evidence of the failure of the larger-unit concept. Duggan, striking some inconsistency with the stand his party had taken the previous year, held that the proposed larger divisions should not be too large and control should not be too remote.

The debate soon came to an end, and, as before, the legislation was withdrawn by Mr. Baker before final reading was initiated.

The decision of the cabinet not to push the Bill through was a sore disappointment; however, I was confident that at a future session this would be done. It is not surprising that my fellow ministers did not feel as strongly the urgency of the need for reform of the system as did the minister in charge. Moreover, the great depression was upon us and the Government of Alberta was no more able to end it than any other government in Canada. There was much dissatisfaction; an election was in the offing; there was considerable opposition to the bill and so it was considered unwise to go ahead with it and it was withdrawn before ever going to Committee. Nevertheless, I continued to preach the larger unit on every possible occasion. (8)

There was considerable support behind Mr. Baker's proposals, in spite of the intransigency of the Trustees' Association and the opposition parties of the Legislature. The UFA Convention, for example, had expressed approval of the reform by a vote of 206 to 161 at the 1929 Annual Convention, although the closeness of the vote must have given the party leadership some doubts about how far and how long any such new school legislation could be pushed. The leadership of the United Farmers of Alberta organization was almost solidly behind the new educational scheme, but the membership at large was not so enthusiastic. Most of the speakers at the convention favored the larger unit, such as Mrs. R. Clarke Fraser, a leader in the United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA). She claimed that the existing educational system was pulling the youth away from the rural areas of the province, since only the large centres offered further educational opportunities (9, p. 15).

The Alberta Teachers' Alliance also supported the Baker Bill in principle. John W. Barnett, General Secretary-Treasurer of the Alliance, gave his reaction to the scheme in a letter to the farm newspaper, *The U.F.A.* Barnett's chief criticism of the 1929 legislation was its hierarchical structure: there should be no General Board and no general taxing area. Rather, the Divisional Board, smaller in size than Mr. Baker had indicated, would be the governing body, able "to meet together and transact business and generally, to direct regularly the administration of the Division, except it be at considerable expenditure of effort and time of the members of the Board, with attendant heavy expense" (10). *The A.T.A. Magazine*, a mouthpiece for the organized teachers, advocated the large unit for several years, and the magazine continued to give its support to the Minister. In an editorial of October 1928 the editor wrote:

It would appear that the Minister is tackling his problem in a careful and thorough manner and weighing the pros and cons of every alternative. The possibilities of a really great advance, the most forward step that has yet been taken by any province in Canada along the line of administrative reform, is on the eve of fulfilment. (11)

Perren Baker was "embittered and exhausted" after his three-year struggle to enact the larger-unit legislation. The Minister, other prominent leaders of the UFA movement, and educators generally, believed that the legislation for the larger school unit was essential to solve the problems of rural education. But the UFA government, in power throughout a difficult decade, would not gamble on the controversial Baker Bill. Mr. Brownlee, the Premier, had apparently arrived at the point where only economically sound moves could be taken. Perhaps this classic statement shows part of the Premier's motivation: "If I only knew what the price of wheat was going to be, I'd know what to do" (12). Premier Brownlee was not willing, he announced to the House, to see his government ride roughshod over the views of the people of his province. If his government focused the attention of the province upon the need for educational reform, his objective would be satisfied. In spite of cabinet and caucus support, Baker must have been heartened by the favorable response to his proposal from educational leaders across the Dominion and in the United States. Dr. George Weir at the University of British Columbia praised Mr. Baker for "supplying an unique type of leadership from a source from which leadership should naturally emanate"; Dr. Walter Murray, president of the University of Saskatchewan, saw such great merit in the Baker proposals "that every friend of Education will rejoice when you have carried them into effect and shown Canada how to transform its rural education"; and Dr. George Works at the University of Chicago congratulated the Minister, "on the excellent form in which you have stated your problem and its solution."

OUTCOME

Five years later, legislation was enacted to realize the larger unit for educational administration in the province. William Aberhart, the new Premier and Minister of Education, presented the School Divisions Act to the first session of the new Legislative Assembly in the fall of 1935. Unlike Baker's 1930 Bill, the Aberhart legislation made no provision for plebiscites or votes in local areas, and within four years, rural Alberta had been organized into 56 school divisions. W. A. Swift, a school inspector at the time, explains the seemingly effortless success of Mr. Aberhart's government in legislating these measures:

Mr. Aberhart, and those who worked with him, did continue to pursue ideas already accepted and supported by Mr. Baker. The fact is that conditions existing in 1935 were so different that an entirely new set of circumstances prevailed. Mr. Aberhart was elected because of his Social Credit doctrine, as a financial Messiah to cure the ills of the depression and various other evils. He received a tremendous mandate. The fact that his platform, or that of the party, included some educational reforms, was not really paid much attention to by the electorate. Nevertheless there they were and were taken to be part of the mandate. They were proceeded with in circumstances such that even though unpopular in a great many quarters (I attended some school division organization meetings and know from first hand) the Government was safe, almost revered, for entirely different reasons, and hence could push ahead. (13)

An earlier and less spectacular outcome of the struggle for the larger unit was the establishment of two experimental larger units in Alberta — Turner Valley in 1928 and Berry Creek in 1933. These experimental units helped prepare the way for a new kind of district organization. In both areas there had been a complete breakdown of the education system, and the Department of Education was faced with the task of overcoming the particular problems faced in each of the areas. In Turner Valley the great influx of oil workers and their families after the 1928 oil strike caused a tremendous increase in the school population without an appreciable increase in either local tax revenues or provincial grants. Faced with an almost impossible situation, the trustees in all districts in the oil field resigned en masse, and the whole area was placed under the administrative direction of the resident inspector as official trustee.

In the Hanna area of the province — hard hit by the drought conditions of the depression years — the Berry Creek District, under the administration of an inspector as official trustee, was formed in 1933. Here, bitter agricultural conditions combined with low market prices to drive the people off the land. The depopulation forced the closure of many schools in this southern region. In this area the Department of Education combined 67 of the collapsed school districts into one large unit (14). The success of these two experimental divisions in Alberta, added to the success of the division formed in neighboring British Columbia in 1933, paved the way

for the eventual realization of Mr. Baker's dream for reorganizing rural education in Alberta.

The three experiments in adapting administrative structure to local conditions proved their worth in Alberta and British Columbia within a very short time and demonstrated the improvements in effectiveness and efficiency which could be made. The success of these experiments did not immediately convince all the people and thus none of the governments in the four western provinces felt they could risk their political future by putting the new type of organization in effect by statutory decree on a province-wide basis. (15, p. 14)

In 1935 the Government of Alberta passed the necessary legislation to begin the process of school district reorganization. The newly elected Social Credit government, which included at least 11 teachers in its ranks, was led by a powerful figure from within the teaching profession, William Aberhart. He was prepared to enact the necessary reforms for which Baker had worked so long and hard. The previous government, overly cautious and beset with the problems caused by the depression, was unable to muster the courage to act in what was a clearly defensible manner. Nonetheless, this writer believes that the promotion of educational reform by Perren Baker and members of his Department, and his supporters within the UFA and UFWA, must have speeded public acceptance of the changes when they finally appeared.

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L. J. (Roy) Wilson is instructor in and chairman of the Department of Arts, Medicine Hat College, Medicine Hat, Alberta, T1A 3Y6.