

The Board of Education, Joseph Martin, and the Origins of the Manitoba School Question: A Footnote

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Un examen attentif des débats et des documents du Conseil manitobain de l'Éducation (Manitoba Board of Education) apporte des précisions intéressantes sur la relation qui existait entre le chef du barreau (Attorney General), monsieur Joseph Martin, et le Conseil ainsi que sur d'autres aspects de la Question Scolaire du Manitoba. Avant la visite de monsieur Dalton McCarthy, le gouvernement avait, de façon manifeste, limité les pouvoirs du Conseil et avait signifié sa volonté de l'abolir pour enlever aux organismes indépendants l'administration de l'éducation, pour faire de l'anglais la seule langue officielle et pour réaliser des économies.

Après avoir renvoyé le surintendant des écoles protestantes, monsieur John Somerset, monsieur Martin se nomma lui-même à ce poste, afin de réduire au silence toute forme d'opposition au changement qui se manifestait dans la section protestante du Conseil.

La victoire de monsieur Martin en 1890 fut partielle et de courte durée. L'enseignement laïc n'était pas aussi répandu qu'il l'aurait souhaité. En 1891, le pouvoir qu'il détenait dans le domaine de l'éducation lui échappa et, cinq ans plus tard, le gouvernement permettait l'usage du français dans les écoles de la province.

Manitoba's first School Act in 1871 placed the administration of schools under a Board of Education, divided into a Protestant and a Catholic Section. Each section was largely autonomous, controlling its own normal schools, setting examinations for teacher certification, authorizing textbooks, and appointing inspectors. Meetings of the board and of the two sections were held regularly. That the board was considered less relevant than the sections is strongly suggested by the fact that many meetings of the board were cancelled because of the lack of a quorum (1, pp. 143-6).

In 1890 the Manitoba Liberal government led by Thomas Greenway abolished the board and placed education under a department of education, transforming the dual confessional system into a nonsectarian system. Attorney General Joseph Martin drafted the bills effecting the change and guided them through the legislature. The Catholic minority claimed that the new laws were unconstitutional, violating provisions of both the British North America Act and the Manitoba Act. Protracted litigation resulted in a decision by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England that the 1890 laws had affected the minority's rights adversely. The

federal Conservative government therefore ordered Greenway to give public support to the Catholic schools. Greenway refused. Remedial legislation introduced into the House of Commons by the federal government was never voted upon because of the expiry of the government's term of office.

The Manitoba School Question was the main issue in the federal election of 1896. The Liberals under Wilfrid Laurier, who opposed remedial action, were triumphant. The Laurier–Greenway agreement of the same year granted the Catholic minority some concessions: it permitted voluntary religious instruction in the last half-hour of the school day, the hiring of a Catholic teacher when there was a sufficient number of Catholic students in a school, and the establishment of bilingual schools.

An examination of the proceedings and letters of the Board of Education casts new light upon the relationship between Martin and the board, and upon several aspects of the Manitoba School Question. The records illuminate Martin's personality, motivations, and tactics, and reveal that the government's move to abolish the board was directed not only against public support of Catholic schools but also against administration of schools by autonomous bodies.

The traditional view of the origins of the School Question is that the speech of D'Alton McCarthy, a Conservative member of parliament, at Portage la Prairie on August 5, 1889, caused the Manitoba government to create a nonsectarian system of education (2, 3, 4, 5). A recent study by Crunican relegates McCarthy to a supporting but still influential role: "Responsibility for the genesis of the Manitoba school bill . . . rested primarily with Joseph Martin, indirectly but ultimately with Thomas Greenway — with the tone of violence and bitterness vastly increased by D'Alton McCarthy" (6, p. 11). Two recent revisionist views are that McCarthy's role has been greatly overemphasized, his involvement being slight and plans for the change in the school system having been made before his visit to Manitoba (7), and that the government's decision was based largely upon a desire to economize (8). The board's records lend support to both of these views.

Finally, there is a slight suggestion in the records that the government's action was caused in part by opposition to the official use of the French language in the province.

In January 1888, Greenway said: "Owing to peculiar circumstances the charge upon the taxpayers for educational purposes is abnormally heavy. The Government will devise means whereby the schools will receive a much larger money grant than has heretofore been given." The *Manitoba Free Press* later interpreted these statements as calling for the creation of a department of education under the control of a cabinet minister (9), as had been done in Ontario in 1876. Martin strongly supported this position. The importance of this administrative change at the time is shown by the fact that the only Protestant member of the legislature to vote against the

1890 amendments (4, p. 249), Rodmond Roblin, did so not because he opposed nonsectarian schools, but because he wanted education to be free from government interference. In May 1888, the legislature passed an amendment to the school law making the government responsible for monetary matters (10, pp. 25–7). In October, Martin charged John Somerset, superintendent of Protestant schools, with a breach of the law in issuing requisitions before the government had passed an enabling order-in-council (11, p. 187). In reply, Somerset said that he had been sure that the order-in-council would pass and that his requisitions had not incurred any extra indebtedness (12).

Apparently, Somerset believed that Martin had disliked him from the time that they had first met. Somerset said that he later realized that Martin's "harsh" attitude was caused by hostility to the office that Somerset occupied (12). Dafoe described Martin as "pugnacious in disposition, disagreeable in manner, strong in his likes and dislikes, outspoken in his views, imperious in temper" (3). If this assessment is accurate, Somerset's conclusion as to the reason for Martin's personal animosity toward him is probably also valid. Of greater importance, this matter reveals the strength of Martin's disapproval of the existing administrative structure.

Confused by Martin's charges of unlawful behavior, the Protestant Section appointed a committee to find out how the government wished the law to be administered (11, p. 188). The committee discovered that the government wished the estimates for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1889, to be made under five headings: the normal school, examination of teachers, expenses of the superintendent's office, payments to collegiates, and payments to "ordinary" schools (11, p. 194).

As the government was interested in economy and as it appeared that abolition of the dual confessional system would result in the saving of money, it seems reasonable to conclude that the government changed the educational system partly as an economy measure. That the government introduced the new method for listing the estimates in order to effect economies is suggested by the fact that, upon receiving the estimates, the government made several changes. Salaries were decreased as follows: superintendent, from \$2500 to \$2000; principal of the normal school, from \$2400 to \$1800; assistant to the principal, from \$1500 to \$1300. In addition, the government rejected the recommended appointment of a sixth inspector of schools, in spite of a greatly increased enrolment in the Protestant schools (11, p. 213). The Protestant Section appealed the government's decision. It pointed out that the normal school principal, David Goggin, had accepted appointment expecting "reasonable" advances in salary. It also defended W. A. MacIntyre, assistant to the principal: "The carrying out of the proposed reduction is likely to lead to the early withdrawal of these excellent teachers" (11, p. 213). Somerset, asking that his own salary not be reduced, said that he had originally been appointed in 1883 at a salary of \$2000, and that since then his responsibilities had increased

greatly (11, p. 213). Still smarting from his loss in salary, Goggin resigned his position in 1893.

At the same time that it reduced these salaries, the government decreed that "no liability of any nature whatsoever in connection with either section of the . . . Board be incurred beyond June 30, 1889" (11, p. 208). Obviously, the days of the Board of Education were numbered.

Of almost as much concern to the Catholic Section as its impending demise was the matter of its reserve fund. In 1873, the government had permitted each section to reserve for contingencies a sum not exceeding 10% of its annual grants (13). By 1889, the fund for the Catholic Section amounted to \$13,879.47. In July, the provincial secretary, J. Prendergast, demanded that the fund be remitted to the government (14). The section complied but attempted until its dissolution to have the fund distributed among the Catholic schools (15, *passim*). This fund was viewed in a very different light by many Protestants, who believed that its existence proved that the Catholics had received favorable treatment in the distribution of government grants. Indeed, Clague has asserted that the discovery of the size of the fund marked "the beginning of the Manitoba school question" (16, pp. 143–4).

There were other significant developments before McCarthy's visit. Early in 1889, J. A. Smart, Minister of Public Works, made extraordinary requests to the superintendents for information concerning the number of schools in their respective sections (17, 18). This sort of information was normally requested before a government take-over of assets. Both sections spent considerable time discussing their roles. The Protestant Section set up a committee to ask the government about the "Board's functions and powers in the engagement of its officers and in regard to other matters" (11, p. 232). In May, Martin advised Somerset not to give any school textbooks a "monopoly": "It is the intention of the Government to have the School Law consolidated next session and probably considerable modification will be made to it" (11, p. 247). In June, the board passed a motion that "in view of the proposed changes in the law, the chairmen of the respective sections confer with the Government" (1, p. 159). It is clear that before McCarthy's visit the Manitoba government planned to abolish the Board of Education and to place educational affairs directly under the administration of a minister of the crown, and that the proposal caused considerable apprehension to the board and its two sections. The records of the board give little indication of the precise change being contemplated at this time. The student must go elsewhere for clues as to whether the government planned to tolerate some sort of Catholic schools and the use of the French language. The plan to abolish the board would have necessitated the end of the dual confessional system, but it would not have precluded separate schools on the Ontario model nor the continuation of the dual language policy. With regard to these matters, Martin's political reasoning seems flawless: if an action will lose the support of a minority group, a government

might as well take the strongest action possible! In his famous letter to Greenway following the McCarthy meeting, Martin said:

Having abolished the Board of Education the only way to run the schools will be to make them all alike in the eyes of the law and have no religious instruction in them. . . . In doing this much we lose without doubt the support of the French. . . . Having lost their support what possible object could we have in not meeting the strong demand for the abolition of the French language? (19)

Martin objected to the use of the French language to such an extent that he found it "disagreeable" to sign "separate school and french [sic] printing vouchers" (20). Perhaps, for the same reason, Martin often delayed the sending of government grants to the Catholic Section (21, *passim*).

In October 1889, the government informed Somerset that because of proposed legislation, his position would be abolished "about April, 1890." His request that he be allowed to retire November 1 with salary continuing until the following April was agreed to as he had taken no holiday during his term of office (11, p. 274).

It was then that an event took place probably unprecedented in the history of the British Empire. Martin was faced with an extremely difficult decision: who should be named to a position of which he disapproved strongly which was to remain in existence for only a few more months? He decided that he would fill the position himself (11, p. 280). Thus, from December 1889 to April 1890, the Attorney General of Manitoba was also Superintendent of Protestant Schools. With the appointment by the government of four new members to the Protestant Section and with Martin's august presence at the meetings, it was not surprising that there was no further discussion of legislative changes.

In February 1890, Martin asked T. A. Bernier, Superintendent of Catholic Schools, for suggested amendments to the school act. Bernier declined, but stated that the government's proposals, which "banished religion" from the schools, the "foundation of all morality," and which violated the rights of the Catholic population granted upon Manitoba's entry into Confederation, were a "distinct blow" to the "natural right" of parents to guide and control education (21, p. 435). In April, Bernier wrote his last official letter, a barely coherent request to Martin that certain outstanding accounts be paid (22).

The 1890 legislation abolished the Board of Education and ended the practice of supporting Catholic schools with public money. Martin was now the minister responsible for the control of public schools. With these changes, together with the abolition of the dual language system, which by inference abolished the use of French as a language of instruction in public schools, it appeared that Martin had achieved victory. Nevertheless, the victory was incomplete and short-lived. Contrary to his expectations, the government, under pressure from the Protestant clergy, who objected to "Godless schools," decided that banning all religious instruction was inexpedient. Thus, the new school system was nonsectarian rather than

secular as Martin had wished it to be (5, pp. 76–7). Martin lost all control over schools in May 1891, when Greenway accepted his resignation from the government, possibly to Martin's surprise and chagrin (3, p. 28). Finally, the Laurier–Greenway compromise permitted the use of not only French but other languages in Manitoba schools.

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