# CONSOLIDATION, BUREAUCRACY AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS: THE FORMATION OF THE MODERN BUREAUCRATIC EDUCATION STATE, 1920 TO 1993

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## ABSTRACT

The creation of a unified Quebec Ministry of Education (MEQ) in 1964 was a much celebrated modernization project that set Quebec on the path to becoming a modern bureaucratic education state. While Quebec's "Great Leap Forward" in education was delayed until the early 1960s, Paul W. Bennett reminds us that it was only one of a number of educational modernization initiatives surfacing at the time elsewhere in Canada. Quebec was a late bloomer in the big shift because, elsewhere in Canada, the forces of modernization and centralized administration hit much earlier and were driven more by school closures and district consolidation. Massive administrative reorganization, precursor to the triumph of the bureaucratic education state, appeared first in Alberta, began gathering from the 1920s onward and achieved dominance from the early post-war years until the late 1960s. Three decades after the creation of the MEQ, consolidation, bureaucracy and public education came to be so closely intertwined in Canada's provincial school systems that it became impossible to answer the question "Who's in charge?" Modernization had further accelerated the trend toward a new form of administrative centralization and state managerialism without much public accountability or attention to student performance results. It was not a situation that Canadian state education reformers of the sixties had expected or foreseen.

Fifty years ago, in April 1963, a Quebec Commission of Inquiry on Education, headed by Msgr. Alphonse Parent, Vice-Rector of Laval University, set the wheels in motion. After seven months of public hearings, 325 individual briefs, and junkets

across North America and into Europe, Parent and his eight fellow commissioners recommended the creation of a Quebec Ministry of Education. In merging the existing Council of Public Instruction with the Department of Youth in the new mega department later that year, Quebec joined Canada's other provinces in embracing a more secular, modernized education state. Swept up in the buoyant spirit of the so-called "Quiet Revolution," most Quebeckers welcomed the change, responding favourably to this modernization project without worrying about its potential, largely unintended consequences. While Quebec's "Great Leap Forward" in education was delayed until the early 1960s, it was only one of a number of educational modernization initiatives surfacing at the time elsewhere in Canada.

## ORIGINS OF THE QUEBEC BUREAUCRATIC EDUCATION STATE

Establishing a Quebec Ministry of Education was a response to grave public concerns being voiced about the former education regime. The mounting criticism can be traced back to a stinging November 3, 1959 letter to *Le Devoir*, written by an obscure Catholic brother using the name *Frère Untel* (*Brother Anonymous*) so as to protect his identity, and blaming the schools for being archaic and out-of-touch with the emerging modern urban industrial society. Five months later, encouraged by *Le Devoir* editor André Laurendeau, the vocal priest expanded his critique in *Les insolences du Frère Untel* (*The Impertinences of Brother Anonymous*.) This *cri du coeur* tapped into deep discontent over the excesses of clerical rule, selling 100,000 copies in the first four months. Laying aside the "delicate" and "nostalgic" temperament of his religious order, Brother Anonymous claimed that the Department of Public Instruction, controlled by clerics, was insular and inefficient and, for 20 years, had failed to provide "civic or patriotic education." He called for closing the old Department and retiring the officials with new medals, including one for "Solemn Mediocrity." Overall, he claimed that religious authority had produced pious, isolated teachers and bred a fear of liberty and freedom of expression. "Education for Heaven" was not good enough and, according to Brother Anonymous, only served to perpetuate what he termed "shrivelled, timid, ignorant Catholicism reduced to a morality" that retarded social advancement.

Elected with the famous slogan *il faut que ça change* (It has to change), Jean Lesage and his Liberal Government did succeed in modernizing Quebec public education between 1960 and 1966. Under a new Minister, Paul Gérin-Lajoie, a series of educational reforms were initiated that not only laid the foundations for a modern education state, but also closed the gap between Quebec and other Canadian provinces. Government grants were made available to school boards; all parents, not just property owners, secured the right to vote in school board elections; compulsory school attendance was extended by a year to age fifteen; free public education was finally extended to the end of high school; and initial moves were made to improve technical and vocational education.

The key Quebec education reform initiative, Bill 60 (1964), placed education more directly under civil rather than religious authority, but measures still had to pass through the Superior Council of Education, where the old Catholic and Protestant clerical elites still held sway. Subsequent reports from the Parent Commission, issued in 1964 and 1965, paved the way for a reorganization of elementary and secondary education, and the establishment of a new polyvalent college system, later named *Collèges d'enseignement général et professionel* and commonly called CEGEPs. While the Lesage reforms met stiff resistance and eventually claimed the government, the education reforms survived. In 1967, the Superior Council approved the "neutral state" system recommended by the Parent Commission and in June of that year, all schools were given the right to declare, within one year, whether they wished to remain denominational. Religious instruction was made optional at the secondary level, but it remained in the core of the elementary curriculum, unless parents chose to exempt their children. General implementation of a more secular school system, while underway, would take considerable time to come to full fruition.

## THE RURAL-URBAN SHIFT AND SCHOOL MODERNIZATION

Quebec was a late bloomer when it came to fully embracing the modern bureaucratic education state. With the implementation of Bill 60 and further modernization reforms, the province came more into line with other provincial systems. Elsewhere in Canada, the forces of modernization hit much earlier and were driven

more by school consolidation. Massive administrative reorganization, precursor to the triumph of the bureaucratic education state, appeared first in Alberta, in the period between 1913 and 1919. A broader Canadian movement to consolidate schools began gathering from the 1920s onward and achieved dominance from the early post-war years to the late 1960s. In this respect, as in many others, Quebec was not a province like the others until it joined the state education reform movement.

Outside of Quebec, the gradual migration of rural people to urban places after 1920 gave rise to a wave of consolidation or larger units of administration, signalling the beginning of the end of small, mostly one-room rural schools. Teachers college officials like W.E. MacPherson, writing in 1924, identified what was known as "the rural school problem." Educational commissions in Manitoba (1923) and later in British Columbia (1938) identified wide rural-urban disparities and recommended changes, including complete provincial tax support for education and the elimination of small administrative units. The Saskatchewan government fell in line, passing the Larger School Units Act in 1944 and, one year later, placed all northern schools under one giant administrative district, funded entirely by the province.

The appeal of larger organizational units, along with the financial difficulties besetting poor rural districts, gave impetus to the Alberta consolidation drive. In 1929, Perren Baker, Alberta's Minister of Education under the U.F.A. Government, attempted in vain to reorganize the province's 150 school districts into twenty large divisions. It was eventually implemented by the Social Credit government of William Aberhart which swept into office in 1935 committed to the large unit scheme of school organization. The division system was introduced and, in 1937, 774 rural districts were amalgamated into 11 divisions; and, by 1941, school governance was organized into 50 large divisions. In 1950, Alberta's County Act gave county councils the powers of divisional school boards, and, by 1965, 28 county boards had been established.

School consolidation came to the fore once again in Nova Scotia in November 1938 when the Council of Public Instruction initiated a Commission on the Larger School Unit. It reported that, as of 1940, the provincial school system remained predominantly rural and still essentially organized in one-room school sections. Of the province's 1,758 total school sections, 1,490 (84.7%) were rural sections, 233 (13.3%) were village sections, and 45 (2.5%) were urban, located in incorporated towns and cities. The fate of the one-room schools would ultimately come down to a matter of "dollars and cents." The financial advantages of consolidation were presented without any reference to social costs in terms of lost identity or community stability. In 1946, Nova Scotia's Angus L. Macdonald government followed up with a plan to develop a provincial system of rural and regional high schools. Consolidating schools and centralizing administrative facilities to achieve financial efficiencies became official Nova Scotia Department of Education dogma after the publication of the 1954 Pottier Commission report. The old one-school sections, with boundaries dating from the founding of the Common School system in 1864-65, were eventually swept away. Despite the existence of a fair number of school officials championing consolidation, public opinion in rural Nova Scotia and elsewhere remained steadfast in its support of the small, local unit of organization.

## CONSOLIDATION AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL PANACEA

School consolidation gradually came to be seen by the rising "educratic" class as an organizational panacea. Much of the rationale for, and momentum behind, consolidation was driven by a new breed of North American educational planners. Foremost among them was Dr. Edgar Morphet, a leading American professor of educational administration who rose to be Chief of School Finance in the U.S. Office of Education. Morphet exerted considerable influence on Canadian education planners and administrators. His papers and textbooks extolled the virtues of larger administrative units and school consolidation. Morphet's planning principles and models were required reading and became a virtual catechism for aspiring principals and administrators. In applying educational finance principles, he and his academic disciples did much to entrench a new bureaucratic ideology, based upon economies of scale, operational efficiency, optimal school size and the allocation of pupil places. It was "top-down" organizational planning in its rawest form.

One of Morphet's ardent Canadian followers was Professor George E. Flower of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, a staunch advocate of larger school districts.

He welcomed the prevailing trend toward larger local education authorities with their advantages for financial control and educational planning. In 1964, he published a widely-read textbook book, How Big is Too Big?, and adopted that theme for his Quance Public Lecture that year on the challenges facing public education. Reacting to the common criticism that smaller units fostered closer personal relationships, he began to argue that public accountability could be decentralized and preserved within the larger local unit. "Larger and fewer school districts," he wrote in December 1967, were the wave of the future as the "tiny horse-and-buggy district" gave way to "the larger motor-car area." Every possible objection to "bigness" was summarily dismissed, even public concerns that larger districts were "too monolithic, too impersonal" and he relished the prospect of "greater centralization" in the form of provincial control over local school authorities.

## THE BIG WAVE – CONSOLIDATION IN THE SIXTIES

The "Bigger is Better" philosophy in education gave a powerful, unrelenting impetus to the next phase of massive school consolidation. This consolidation movement was signaled by the introduction of regional schools, a modernist invention marking the arrival of what John Kenneth Galbraith once called the "technostructure" and only compounding the problem of rural depopulation. Such bureaucratic systems and ways of thinking were highly incompatible with the prevailing values in most local communities. It took a young economics professor, Jim McNiven, to see, back in 1978, that the advance of systematized forms of organization, including larger school districts, was a harbinger of fundamental social change. "School reorganization," he contended, exemplified "a multi-faceted attempt to remould the nature of rural society, and failing that, to depopulate those rural areas where resistance to this process is greatest."

Ontario experienced what Robin S. Harris aptly described as a "Quiet Evolution" in public education. After the unceremonious shelving of a 1950 Royal Commission report, produced by Justice John A. Hope, and calling for major restructuring, organizational change came gradually, in stages. Under Minister of Education and later Premier John Robarts (1959-1962), a massive school building boom was initiated and the high school program completely organized into three divisions: academic, commercial, and science, technology and trades. His successor, William G. Davis, presided over a massive integrated K-13 education budget, authorized the establishment of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (1965), and a new community college system, known as the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology. The school system was regionalized with townships being the smallest units of administration and, as of January 1969, county-size school boards were established promising a greater range of program services in rural communities. Even though the June 1968 report, *Living and Learning*, popularly known as the Hall-Dennis Report, spelled the end of the Robarts Plan of 1962 and encouraged more "child-centred learning," the trend to regionalization and bureaucratic management remained unabated.

Maritime advocates of the Larger School District model drew inspiration from New Brunswick's 1962 Royal Commission on Finance and Municipal Taxation. The Byrne Commission proposed a sweeping reorganization of that province's school system. It recommended a drastic reduction in the number of school districts from 422 to just thirty-three, and the total takeover by the province of the funding of education. The Louis Robichaud government endorsed the plan in January 1962 and gave it a name, the Programme of Equal Opportunity. In the Maritimes, New Brunswick would lead the way in consolidating the entire system, cutting back significantly on the responsibilities of local school authorities. The Byrne-Robichaud plan drew heavy critical fire as a centralizing scheme but was implemented after Robichauld won re-election in October 1967. It was welcomed by consolidators like Flower as a needed dose of "fiscal reality" which would "make sure that total available revenues for education" were "expended equitably over the whole province." The appealing popular mantra of equitable "educational opportunity for all" was beginning to morph into "one-size-fits-all" to provide "educational value for every dollar spent."

Nova Scotia responded with a Comprehensive School System Plan of its own. Larger school units were identified as the solution for many of the system's ills, particularly at the senior and junior high school levels. In 1968, Premier G.I. Smith's government passed legislation to permit the amalgamation of school boards in selected regions designated as an "amalgamation area." Municipal authorities were authorized to enter into negotiations aimed at securing amalgamation agreements. Instead of imposing a New Brunswick-style regime, the province attempted to "broker" agreements between the Urban

and Rural School Boards Association and the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union. Unlike New Brunswick, Nova Scotia inched toward "unified comprehensive services" through a protracted series of negotiations. The "let's make a deal" approach guided by Education Minister Gerald Doucet secured compliance while ruffling fewer feathers.

In Prince Edward Island, the long-delayed consolidation of schools was achieved through a virtual "educational revolution" aimed at eliminating small rural schools and extending high school education. A Royal Commission on educational finance again laid the groundwork. After years of vacillation, Conservative Premier Walter Shaw finally moved to build a network of regional comprehensive and vocational high schools and, by 1963, fifteen rather standardized brick box high schools were scattered across the Island. A youthful and dynamic Liberal Premier, Alex Campbell, toppled the Shaw government in July 1966 and unleashed a torrent of organizational change and stirred up an Island hornet's nest. A Toronto-based firm, Acres Research and Planning, guided by researcher Dr. Alan F. Brown of OISE, produced an August 1967 consultant's report which claimed that the public school system was full of antiquated one-room schools. Out of 25,265 elementary school children, nearly 16,000 attended schools judged physically inadequate. PEI's Comprehensive Development Plan, guided by General Manager Del Gallagher, plowed ahead with a 10-year timetable (1966 to 1976) eliminating all 252 one-room schools and all 258 two-to-five roomers, sending shock waves through many villages and rural communities. For a whole generation of students, consolidation brought a first encounter with school buses, children of other faiths, and schoolyard cuss words. In the case of PEI, the number of districts was slashed from over 400 to 5, sweeping away the province's deeply rooted one-room school system.

## THE RISE OF "ONE BIG SYSTEM" THINKING

School consolidation in PEI represented a radical shift, but in Canada's urban and suburban communities bureaucratic forms of school organization and management grew more naturally out of post-war prosperity and expansion. Major metropolitan areas came to be served by mammoth, sprawling school system bureaucracies. The emergence of the Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, school system provides a typical example. Up until 1960, Dartmouth was an incorporated town – and the Town and the outlying suburbs operated their own schools. The completion of the Angus L. Macdonald Bridge spurred a Dartmouth population explosion and gradually changed the small-town atmosphere. The days of long line-ups and daily conversations at the Dartmouth Ferry dock came to an end. School consolidation in the booming municipality of Dartmouth did not come easily. Beneath the veneer of solidarity, local Dartmouth Councillors were unsettled by the bewildering changes and muttered about "losing a feeling of family" in the old town. Mayor I.W. Akerley rose above the fray, forged alliances, and pursued consolidation with vigour. His successor, Mayor Joe Zatzman, promoted system expansion from a businessman's point of view. The biggest test came in 1966-67 with amalgamation of the former Catholic schools and integration of the oft-forgotten Department of National Defence schools. School board politics added to the unpredictability, especially after elections, when half the municipal representatives might turn over. School Superintendents like Carmen F. Moir of Dartmouth came to exert considerable influence over an increasingly complex, bureaucratic local education system.

## THE TRIUMPH OF THE "THREE BS" – BIGGER, BETTER AND BUREAUCRACY

School promoters and consolidators in the 1960s and early 1970s believed that "Bigger is Better" in public education. School superintendents in Canada, with few exceptions, accepted the trend toward larger administrative units and were completely swept up in modernizing the entire school system. Swollen student enrolments, driven by the arrival of the Baby Boom generation, produced massive expansion, raising concerns about the rising cost of education. Cost conscious Canadians were concerned about bringing a system that now consumed a much greater share of taxes under some kind of control. Further school system consolidation was spurred in the 1960s by the need to wring more operational efficiency out of a system growing like an untended weed. In all Canadian provinces, elementary and secondary education come under more direct provincial control and the number of school districts was reduced drastically.

Most political leaders and education bureaucrats in Canada's English-speaking provinces heralded consolidation as the wave of the present, and future, but a few lonely voices remained skeptical about the latest educational panacea. One of the first academics was an American revisionist educational historian, Professor

Michael B. Katz. After recently arriving at OISE from Columbia University, he wrote a controversial 1968 article calling into question the ideology and objectives of modern public education. His fresh perspective not only cut against the grain of the Canadian educational establishment, it also encouraged a flurry of critical thinking. Small bands of academic skeptics, based in Toronto at OISE or associated with *This Magazine is About Schools*, began to question their previous assumptions about the beneficence of public education.

Katz proposed a new way of looking at the origin and motives of publicly-funded education. In "Class, Bureaucracy and Schools," he contended that school reform, since the mid-1900s, was actually driven by "conservative social forces" who created and upheld a system expressing and reflecting their aspirations, fears, and interests. Public school systems, he argued, represented "the attempt of the 'better people' to do something to the rest." From the 1880s onward, Egerton Ryerson's Ontario model, like its American counterpart, had assumed a fixed form, remarkably resistant to change. The whole system exemplified the following core characteristics, as expressed in his words: "it was universal, tax-supported, free, compulsory, bureaucratic, class-based, and racist." From the beginning, the school system promoted middle class or "bourgeois" social values, and favoured bureaucratic regulation over the fostering of individual rights. While public school promoters professed to support "equal opportunity" for all, Katz claimed that they acted differently, favouring bureaucracy as a means of controlling or strictly limiting the potential for social mobility among the common people.

Few Canadians were influenced by Katz and the academic skeptics, but similar sentiments were voiced by those local citizens steamrollered by the educational bulldozer otherwise known as school consolidation. Closing down schoolhouses and introducing families to the joys of school bus transportation aroused anger, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness in many small communities. Most teachers were rooted in, and often strongly attached to, the rural school communities, even though larger consolidated schools and junior high schools did open up wider career opportunities and the potential for higher salaries. Expressing skepticism about "bigger and better" schools was frowned upon by the authorities, so it was best kept to oneself. Away from the school and in retirement rural schoolteachers such as Dorothy Elderkin Lawrence, editor of *Telling Tales Out of School* (1995), were more candid in their views about the loss of community identity incurred through the passing of the one-room schoolhouse.

The public mood in Canada's English-speaking provinces, as in Quebec, remained fairly buoyant in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A Centennial Year commemorative booklet, *Nova Scotia: Three Hundred Years in Education*, captured well the spirit and temper of the times. Modernizing forces were in the ascendancy and voices of dissent were muffled in the effervescent, celebratory atmosphere. Consolidated schools had arrived or were coming to most small towns and larger villages, and hundreds of older abandoned wooden schools were facing extinction or an uncertain future. Older teaching philosophies and methods were also under attack. Amidst all the clamour, Dr. William B. Hamilton of the Atlantic Institute of Education, was one of the few educational insiders who openly expressed his reservations about the new directions. The overriding theme was "bigger is better," he wryly observed in 1979. "Whether that system is superior," he continued, "is a matter to be decided by some future historian."

Over the next two decades, consolidation, bureaucracy and public education came to be so closely intertwined that it became impossible to answer the question "Who's in charge?" Modernization had further accelerated the trend toward a new form of administrative centralization and state managerialism without much public accountability or attention to student performance results. Prominent education analysts like the Toronto *Globe and Mail* education reporter Jennifer Lewington and OISE professor Stephen B. Lawton had come to describe the school system as a "bureaucratic fortress" maintaining strict boundaries between "insiders" and "outsiders" in education. Public education in the early 1990s was now said to be impenetrable and facing "a crisis of public confidence." Leading education critics like Lewington, Graham Orpwood, Andrew Nikiforuk, and advocacy groups like the Ontario Coalition for Education Reform confronted the modern bureaucratic education state, largely erected since the 1960s, and called for "the walls to come down."

The triumph of the modern liberal education state had not led to nirvana. In 1992, the Quebec Ministry of Education marked its 30th year by attempting to significantly change its direction. The new Plan of Action, *Joining Forces* (1992), recognized the limits of centralized direction and the need to "make the education system more flexible in order to give freer rein to those who work closely with the student." It was not a situation that Quebec's Brother Anonymous or Canadian state education reformers of the sixties had expected or foreseen.

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