

French Canada and the Western School Questions

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French Canada and the Western School Questions

Two recently published books, first prepared as Ph.D. theses, examine the interaction of church and state during the separate school crises in Manitoba and the North-West Territories.¹ Though numerous studies have been made of both these closely related issues, Paul Crunican and Manoly Lupul are the first to have exploited the archives of the Catholic Church. In doing so they add an essential dimension to our understanding of two critical developments in the defining of French Canada's status within Confederation. It is clear that the victory of the public school system in western Canada helped to ensure that the French Canadians would not feel secure as a distinct culture outside Quebec. But the question then arises, why did the French Canadians in Quebec not take a stronger stand in defence of minority rights outside their Province? In 1896 they rejected the Conservative party though it supported a remedial bill designed to ensure separate schools. In 1905 all but two Quebec Liberal M.P.'s supported Laurier when he bowed to Protestant pressure on the separate school issue in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Crunican feels that in 1896 Quebecers had simply lost faith in the ability and willingness of the Conservative government to redress the grievances of the Manitoba minority. This cannot be denied, but he may be going too far when he claims that they felt Laurier would be more successful. The traditional theory of Laurier winning Quebec in spite of his school policy still makes more sense. Lupul confines himself more strictly to Ottawa and the Territories, but he makes it very clear that by 1905 most French Canadians realized the futility of trying to force their institutions upon a hostile majority. In fact it is quite probable that they already felt this way in 1896.

The attitudes of Quebec toward the Manitoba School Question were embodied to a remarkable degree in one man, Lieutenant-Governor Adolphe Chapleau. Historians are almost unanimous in declaring that, as spokesman for Quebec's moderate Conservatives, Chapleau might well have rescued the province for the government had he consented to join the Cabinet prior to the election. The disagreement arises as to why he stayed out. Neatby and Saywell have attributed his behaviour to his hostility towards the ultramontane wing of the party², while Crunican echoes Lovell Clark in claiming that

- 1 Paul Crunican's *Priests and Politicians: Manitoba schools and the election of 1896* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1974) was submitted to the University of Toronto in 1968. Harvard accepted Manoly R. Lupul's *The Roman Catholic Church and the North-West School Question: a study in Church-state relations in Western Canada, 1875-1905* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1974) in 1963.
- 2 H. B. Neatby and J. T. Saywell, "Chapleau and the Conservative Party in Quebec", *CHR*, XXVII (1956), pp. 1-21.

he was simply skeptical of the government's sincerity on the school question.³ However he has only Chapleau's own word to support this theory, while he fails to refute the Neatby-Saywell argument that if Chapleau had been deeply concerned about the remedial legislation, he would have joined the Cabinet in order to fight more effectively for its passage.⁴ This raises the possibility that the western minority had simply been written off, leaving the Manitoba School Question as a mere excuse for a confrontation between forces competing for power within Quebec itself.

The extent to which politics influenced and distorted the school issue is carefully and ably described by Crunican throughout his book. He removes any lingering doubts of a possible Laurier-Greenway conspiracy to embarrass the Conservative government, but reveals how Clifford Sifton used the issue to bolster provincial rights sentiment in Manitoba. Sifton outmanoeuvred the clumsy Ottawa negotiators with every encounter, skillfully presenting them as the coercive tool of the Catholic Church. To be fair to the Conservatives, Crunican implies that Sifton's task was made easier by the hard line positions taken by the two successive archbishops of Manitoba, Taché and Langevin. Both can be defended for refusing to play politics with what they considered the sacred rights of their people, but their strongest supporter, Mgr. Laflèche of Trois-Rivières, was not so politically impartial. His anti-Liberal prejudices kept him so firmly committed to the government that he refused to consider the suggestion of disgruntled ultramontanes that French Canadians abandon the Conservatives to form their own nationalist party. As Crunican points out, Laflèche's contribution to the Catholic cause was questionable on two counts. By encouraging the government to take a hard line from the first, he helped to eliminate any possibility for an amiable compromise with Manitoba. Then, when the Conservatives began to waver on the issue, the Catholics found themselves with no one to turn to. Too close an identification with one party had ultimately weakened the political impact of the Church. Bishops Fabre and Emard of Montreal and Valleyfield understood this much more clearly than Laflèche, which helps to explain why they insisted that the 1896 mandement should not openly endorse the Conservative party.⁵

Crunican has found that Emard and Fabre were also very sensitive to the possibility that an overly-close identification between Church and party would eventually alienate many Catholics from their priests. They argued that the faithful could not help but be skeptical when it became known that, in

3 Crunican, p. 242; Lovell C. Clark, "A History of the Conservative Administrations 1891 to 1896" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1968), pp. 540-5.

4 Neatby and Saywell, p. 21.

5 See Crunican, pp. 187-8, 258-70.

return for redress of grievances, the Conservatives were demanding open clerical intervention in favour of their candidates. Consequently the 1896 mandement left an opening for Catholics to vote for Liberal candidates who had pledged support for some form of remedial legislation, and nearly all of the French-speaking Liberals took this pledge. In addition the majority of bishops maintained a scrupulous neutrality throughout the election campaign. Crunican therefore agrees with Clark that Quebecers, in supporting Laurier, did not repudiate religion for race.⁶ But Crunican overlooks the possibility that the bishops may have adopted such a moderate stand simply because they were afraid that Quebec would vote Liberal anyway. Emard of Valleyfield, in opposing outright endorsement of the Conservative candidates, warned that "Il faut nous ménager une position ténable et honorable, pour le cas très possible, ou nous devons nous présenter, comme pétitionnaires, devant un gouvernement composé des adversaires d'aujourd'hui."⁷

To test the hypothesis that the Quebec electorate felt little inconsistency as Catholics in voting for Laurier, Crunican analyzes the effect of clerical intervention at the local level. From his discovery that "the pattern of vote swing to the Liberals across the country does not seem to have been very predictable by whether the clergy were active, or accused of being active, for the Conservatives",⁸ he concludes that the race-religion or Laurier-Church conflict really did not exist. But is it not more rational to conclude from this evidence that Laurier's appeal was so strong that voters were simply ignoring the advice of their clergy? Surely the Quebecers could not have been unaware that their Church officially favoured the Conservatives. Crunican has shown that the lines between the Liberals and the Church were not as rigidly drawn as we have been led to believe, but there is still no denying that there was a conflict, and that Laurier was the victor. This is not to argue that the conflict was between nationalism and/or liberalism and religion. The clergy was as nationalistic as the Liberals, and the Liberals had long since abandoned their radical, anti-clerical ideology. Although it may not have been expressed in such terms, the true issue at stake was whether or not French Canada would become more exclusively identified with the province of Quebec. As A. I. Silver has pointed out, during the nineteenth century the Catholic Church was much more concerned with the West than the average French-speaking Quebecer was.⁹ To the Québécois it was more logical to vote for a francophone who supported provincial rights than to vote for a centralist party whose defence of a small and distant French-speaking minority was suspect at best. It is even possible that the moderate position

6 *Ibid.*, p. 310; Clark, "The Conservative Party in the 1890's", *CHAR* (1961), p. 71.

7 Quoted in Crunican, p. 260.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 310.

9 A. I. Silver, "French Canada and the Prairie Frontier, 1870-1890", *CHR* (1969), pp. 11-36.

taken by the younger more liberal Quebec bishops was influenced by this attitude.

This hypothesis is strengthened by comparing the Quebec reaction with that of the New Brunswick Acadians. In an article published in this journal in 1972,¹⁰ but overlooked by Crunican, I found that intervention on the part of Bishop Rogers of Chatham effectively interrupted the Acadian exodus from the Conservative to the Liberal party. The explanation does not lie in a stronger front presented by the Church in New Brunswick, for the Bishop of St. John remained aloof from the issue; and Rogers was involved in a serious language dispute with the Acadians. Nor could the Acadians help but be as aware as Quebeckers (with R. C. Weldon and George Foster campaigning within New Brunswick) that the Conservative stand on remedial legislation left much to be desired. The one significant difference between the two francophone populations was that one was a majority within its province, while the other was not. The Acadians simply could not afford to reject a bill which promised redress of grievances for a fellow Catholic minority.

Crunican and Clark have probably gone too far in emphasizing that many French Canadians voted for Laurier because they felt he would actually obtain the more equitable settlement for the Franco-Manitobans. Militant expansionist Catholicism was dying with the ultramontane movement, and Bourassa (an ultramontane himself) had not yet begun his campaign to arouse French Canadians to the danger of abandoning the West to the Anglo-Saxons. Aside from the cultural-religious question, it is more than likely that local issues and Liberal abandonment of free trade played an important role in the Quebec election. Studies of other provinces (Western Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) have shown that these were the two determining factors in most constituencies.¹¹ Until the appearance of a detailed analysis of the 1896 election in Quebec, we can only speculate on the reasons for Laurier's victory, but indications are that it represented the tendency of French Canadians to withdraw ever further into the fortress of Quebec.

If the French Canadians of Quebec refused to jeopardize provincial rights for the sake of their Manitoba confrères, they were no more willing to do so for those in the North-West in 1905. Laurier and Bourassa put up more of a

10 J. I. Little, "New Brunswick Reaction to the Manitoba Schools' Question," *Acadiensis*, I (Spring, 1972), pp. 43-58.

11 L. E. Eayrs, "The Election of 1896 in Western Ontario" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1951); K. M. McLaughlin, "The Canadian General Election of 1896 in Nova Scotia" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1967); J. I. Little, "The 1896 Federal Election in New Brunswick" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1970); Harold Leard, "The 1896 Federal Election in Prince Edward Island" (unpublished M.A. report, University of New Brunswick, 1972). Since Crunican has not updated his research since 1968, he has overlooked the last two theses.

fight than they had in 1896, but this time the western francophones were a much smaller percentage of the population, and their legal position was also less secure. Lupul has actually found that the French Canadians in the North-West were rather pessimistic about the future of their language. Most of those who were not indifferent to education preferred state schools where they were convinced that their children would be better prepared for employment by learning English. The Territories Council began to move towards a public school system in 1884, but the Catholic Church was quite successful in defending its position until the Council was replaced with the more powerful Legislative Assembly in 1888. Even before D'Alton McCarthy arrived on the scene in 1889, the Assembly let it be known that it favoured public English language schools. In 1890 when the Assembly was permitted to choose its language of deliberation, it quickly eliminated French. In 1891, when it gained control over the annual parliamentary grant, it undermined dualism in education by replacing the Board of Education with a Council of Public Instruction directly responsible to the government. In contrast to Manitoba, the Catholic schools of the Northwest seemed destined to lose their status slowly through administrative measures, making it difficult to determine just at what point the Territories government was infringing upon the rights of the minority. The federal government and the Privy Council both refused to challenge the 1892 school legislation which made the two school systems more uniform. Fortunately the Territories government remained content with the new controls, leaving the situation quite stable until 1904 when the North-West was about to gain provincial status as Saskatchewan and Alberta. Laurier's school clauses were challenged by Clifford Sifton, who claimed that they would restore elements of the old dual school system. According to Lupul, Laurier had wanted only to ensure that there would be no further infringement upon confessional schools, and so he readily agreed to Sifton's amendment designed to ensure that the status quo would be maintained.¹² Somehow it still seems more likely that Laurier knew what he was doing from the first, but was not willing to risk his government's life over the issue.

Nor was it simply a matter of giving in to political pressure, for Lupul demonstrates that the minority had a very weak legal position. If, on the one hand, the North-West had actually entered Confederation in 1870, one could argue that the separate school system, which was only later established by law, was not guaranteed by section 93. If, on the other hand, the North-West did not have provincial status before 1905, again Alberta and Saskatchewan did not fall precisely within the scope of section 93 because it was meant to guarantee the separate schools which colonies had imposed upon themselves before joining Confederation. The school system of the North-West was the work of an external authority, the federal government. Technically the

12 Lupul, pp. 178, 185.

Catholics could argue that because Saskatchewan and Alberta were created by the Dominion, they should be endowed with a separate school system and guarantees for the French language, but this ignored the fact that the North-West did have a large measure of self-government and its own Ottawa-approved institutions before 1905. Lupul has discovered that even the minority's legal adviser felt that the Catholics had no constitutional grounds to stand upon. Bishop Legal of St. Albert was prepared to accept the bill, but not so his metropolitan, Archbishop Langevin of St. Boniface, who demanded a complete return of the separate school system of 1875. However most Catholics realized that Langevin's hard line had done little for them in Manitoba, where there were no state-supported Catholic schools, even in name. Consequently, Langevin's position attracted little support from either his fellow bishops or the papal delegate.

If there had been an election on the issue, as in 1896, French Canadians would have been able to vote Liberal with a clear conscience because, Bourassa's statements to the contrary, Laurier had gone as far as possible under the circumstances to protect minority rights in the North-West. Even more than in 1896, most Québécois understood that it was pointless to force their institutions upon a region where they had become hopelessly outnumbered by an unsympathetic majority, particularly when the cost would be more federal power and prestige at the expense of the provinces. The fate of French Canada in the West did not hinge upon the school questions; those issues would not have arisen had that fate not already been sealed.

J. I. LITTLE

Maine: A Bibliographical Review

Since its founding in 1822, the Maine Historical Society has been the center of research on the State's past. At its location in Portland, the Society houses many of the major document, newspaper, and book collections available within Maine. Besides continuing to improve its capacity to make manuscripts, newspapers, and books accessible, it has steadily enlarged its list of publications and through an arrangement with the New Hampshire Publishing Company at Somersworth has built up a good, brief list. Among the books in print are Neal W. Allen Jr., ed., *Province and Court Records of Maine* (6 vols., Portland, 1928-1975); Ronald F. Banks, *Maine Becomes a State: The Movement to Separate Maine from Massachusetts* (Middletown, Conn., 1970); Gordon E. Kershaw, *The Kennebeck Proprietors, 1749-1775* (Somersworth, N.H., 1975), and various reprints of older, but still useful, Maine books such as the 1865 edition of William Willis' *The History of Portland* (reprinted