

FAITHFUL AND FRUITLESS IN ONTARIO: STATUS QUO IN EDUCATION POLICY

Michael Van Pelt, Ray Pennings, and Deani Van Pelt

The public funding of private religious schools was the flash point, and for John Tory the tipping point, of the Ontario election. But none of the three leading parties evidently thought to ask the faith-based education movement whether they were inclined to accept funding. According to the authors, about half these private schools weren't. In effect, much ado about nothing, at least as to how the debate was framed.

Point de mire des élections ontariennes, la question du financement public des écoles confessionnelles privées aura fait basculer la campagne de John Tory. Mais de toute évidence, aucun des trois principaux partis n'a songé à demander au mouvement d'éducation religieuse s'il désirait être financé de la sorte. Or, estiment les auteurs, environ la moitié des écoles visées déclinaient l'offre. Beaucoup de bruit pour rien, donc, à tout le moins pour ce qui est de l'orientation imprimée au débat.



As Ontario students enjoyed a break from regular classes this summer the heads of Conservative political enthusiasts were spinning with not-so-novel visions for the provision of equitable religious schooling in Ontario. What followed was a flawed and shallowly debated education policy proposal which sank the provincial Conservative campaign in the 2007 election. Rather than bringing Ontarians of different educational perspectives together in debate and conversation on how to improve education through recognizing diversity, whether faith-based or otherwise, this election appears to have driven them further apart.

One of the factors inhibiting effective dialogue was the way the debate was framed. By focusing on the question of funding minority religious schooling, the broader and more important issue of educational diversity, equity and inclusion became lost. The debate quickly became about whether government should be involved in religion, and in what respect it would be appropriate to fund particular beliefs. By framing the debate around religion, the focus on educational diversity and inclusivity lost its coherence. Secondary questions became primary ones and that which ought to have been discussed rarely surfaced.

How John Tory and his team ever came to agree that the "Davis education plan of the 80's" could work today is difficult to understand. Historian Michael Bliss was not the only one to raise this caution. Strategists mistakenly imagined the resurrection of this decades-old initiative as a perfect political bone to engage the more socially conservative within the party. Yet Tory's plan failed at this. The strategists did not catch the message that not all faith-based independent schools were interested in becoming part of the public system.

During the election the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) which represents 52 schools publicly indicated their unwillingness to get aboard this policy. What rarely surfaced in the debate or in the strategists' design of the plan was the likelihood that less than half of the Ontario faith-based schools would even consider this proposal. Simply put, Tory failed to capture the imagination or the interest of this community, this on top of his failure to bring social conservatives into the "big tent" of the Conservative campaign coalition in the first place.

In reality many of Tory's problems in reaching this demographic were because his policy was not entirely dissimilar to McGuinty's. A closer look at both John Tory's and Dalton McGuinty's view of education in Ontario shows a very similar plan in a government-designed, government-funded, and government-operated education system. Tory's plan was to invite these schools and their 53 000 kids into the public education system. McGuinty argued that we must make improvements so we would attract people back into the public system. Consider a statement from Premier McGuinty in 2004. "It's time to stop the slide in public education that has been marked by [the] disturbing trend [that] the number of children attending private schools has increased by 40 percent over the last eight years." Cut away the "wedge politics turned upside down" and we have two men driving down two different roads to the same public system. For Tory it was a road of "fairness and principle" to those outside the system. For McGuinty, it became the dance of suggestions of social unrest, segregation and divisiveness.

Given the relative similarity of these two proposals, it shouldn't prove surprising to Ontarians that substantial debate

on the topic of educational diversity never really took place. There remain significant items that do need discussion; items which, by and large, were the victims of misinformation and misunderstanding during the provincial election.

A first topic which lacked probing was the real cost and impact on public education of funding some independent schools. It was estimated that it would cost \$400 million for the independent faith-based schools and their 53,000 students to join the public schools. But if it is the case that only half of Ontario's independent faith-based schools would ultimately opt for this proposal, the figure would be more properly \$200 million. Further, the number of students that this would add could then be estimated to be around 25 000. Yet, imagine if all 53 000 students attending faith-based schools (or even all 136,000 privately schooled students in the province) had attempted to enroll in their local public school in September. These are Ontarians who have as genuine a right to attend their local public school as anyone, but the real cost to the public system of these additions is not only largely unknown, but largely ignored.

Second, an opportunity for robust conversation on the nature and importance of diversity for a society was missed. Could it be that an innovative and knowledge based economy requires innovation and diversity in the design and delivery of education? One could argue with some success that an educational model of diversity could provide social stimulation, innovation, and cultivation of profound intersections between different spheres and beliefs in society. Yet through their education policy proposals, both the Liberals and the Conservatives seemed to suggest that independent and non-conformist thinking is harmful for a society — a suggestion that a great deal of economic thinking would be quick to contest.

Similarly, and thirdly, we have not discussed how the presence of independent schools cultivates accountability and competition which can improve Ontario public education. Different perspectives, methodologies and priorities

in education keep a lively accountable conversation happening between public, Catholic and independent partners. McGuinty demonstrated as much when he vowed in 2004 to improve public education because increasing numbers of parents were leaving.

Furthermore, Preston Manning has pointed out that despite having very similar per capita spending on education, Alberta consistently ranked higher than Ontario in primary and secondary education. He attributes this excellence to the greater diversity of education choices, more “freedom to choose” the best educational options for their children, and more resources to support these choices.

A fourth point of discussion would be on the question of rights. Ontarians have long been aware that the United Nations has frowned upon the structure of Ontario's educational system, as privileging specific faiths over and against others. But there is another rights question at work as well. Who has the right to select and determine how children will be educated? While the province of Ontario does not make public education mandatory, its distribution of finances carefully disciplines the kinds of educational choices that can be made by the majority of families in Ontario. So 94 percent of Ontario students and their families comply. Only six percent choose independent schools or home-based education, only half of which are faith-based choices. Yet does the province have no moral mandate to recognize these parents' views and needs?

Finally, the election became a platform for the growth of intolerance and suspicion when it could have become a debate on how to incorporate diverse but legitimate partners in the culture and society of the province of Ontario. A sad by-product of this campaign is that it became an exercise in religious intolerance. Unfortunately, a small but identifiable minority — comprised of mainly Christians, Jews and Muslims — has become the target of this.

McGuinty's devastating inference that faith-based schools encourage segregation, social unrest and division directly challenges the legitimacy of such minori-

ties and their perspectives. The value of this opinion voiced in a careless campaign by a political leader holding the Office of Premier will quietly embed its troubled implications into our cultural ethos. Will graduates of such faith-based institutions be viewed as culturally suspect? Will families who choose such schools be increasingly regarded with apprehension? Will the Premier's views hold sway despite research showing otherwise? The independent school community is civically engaged, publicly active, entrepreneurial, and family oriented. In April 2007, the present authors reported higher than average civic involvement in federal, provincial, and municipal elections by private school parents and also found that 40 percent of parents who choose private schools for their children are entrepreneurs compared to 7 percent of parents in the public schools.

Additionally, Statistics Canada has recently found that religious families donate more money and volunteer more time than the general population to social service organizations. If independent school communities are healthy communities, and their supporting families are making significant contributions to the social and economic health of our society, suggestions of their being the source of social upheaval can hardly be accurate.

Not only did Ontarians miss the opportunity to discuss the impact and potential of educational diversity in this last election, it failed to robustly discuss the proposal that was offered. Careful research can be difficult to achieve on a campaign trail, but surely with election politics comfortably behind us Ontario can begin to imagine more creative solutions to the problems with education in this province, to the benefit of all students, and to the health and prosperity of this province.

Michael Van Pelt is president and Ray Pennings is vice president of the Work Research Foundation, Hamilton, Ontario. Deani Van Pelt is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario.