

# Not Catholic? In Ontario? Pity!

*Ontario politicians are guilty of faulty logic and religious discrimination.*

By Mark Holmes

Ontario's minister of education has defended her government's refusal to support non-Catholic religious schools by asserting that we cannot afford equal treatment for all parents because that would entail taking millions of dollars out of the public (i.e., secular) education system.

Is she saying that her government's recent increase in spending on Catholic schools, bringing them up to the level of public school funding, meant taking millions of dollars out of public schools?

Is it all right, by her reasoning, to sacrifice public school children for Catholicism but not for any other religion? Does this logic also mean that the government's plan to expand hospital emergency services requires even longer queues for cancer treatment?

The Minister's inflammatory comments serve to reinforce secular prejudice against religion, but she should be careful: the people whose prejudice she is counting on (those who are opposed to funding religious schools) would like to get rid of Catholic schools too.

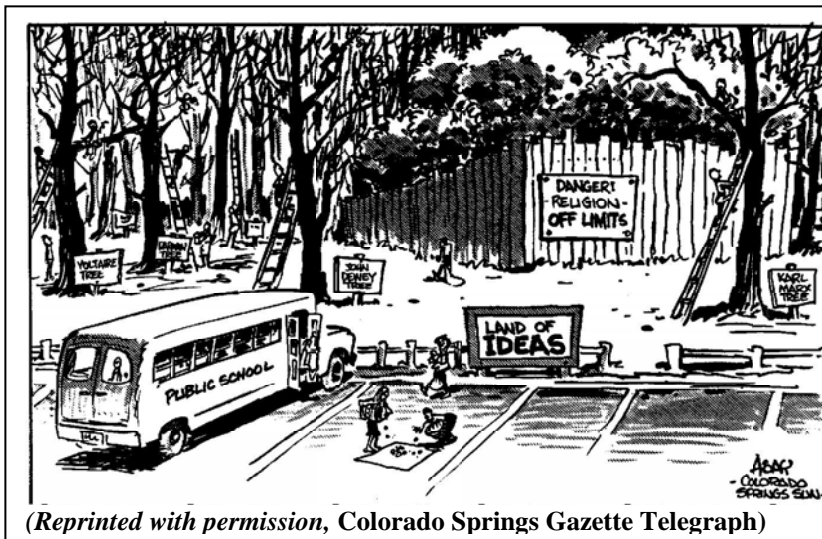
There just aren't many defenders of the status quo outside parliament, for the simple reason that it is morally indefensible.

If we turn from the Minister's stunted imagination to reality, the Ontario government has two options in dealing with its unacceptable discrimination in education.

It can follow Newfoundland and Quebec and change the constitution, removing the constitutional obligation to fund Catholic schools. The government could then decide how to treat all faiths equitably, either by building one big, unionized monopoly of secular schools (Newfoundland's step back into the mediocre past) or by

developing a non-discriminatory funding for mula (the British Columbia and Manitoba solution).

Although logical, that route would likely be politically disastrous, since Roman Catholics would reasonably believe that constitutional change could lead to the gradual disappearance of their schools.



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Alternatively and preferably, the government could simply negotiate an agreement with the affected religious groups. My guess is that, taking a quick look at the government's attachment to the total centralization of education, the last thing religious schools would want is to become fully-funded wards of the government.

For 30 years, Ontario governments of all stripes have supported a system totally devoted to 'progressive' education, where it is how children feel about themselves that counts, not what they have learned.

Discounted almost everywhere else years ago because it did not work, progressive education is finally beginning to fade in Ontario.

Today, faced with the growing recognition that, surprise, funding some religions but not others is discrimination and that parents ought to be able to choose their children's schools, all the government can do is

recoil in horror at the thought of 10 or 15 school systems.

Most proponents of school choice think that the two existing school bureaucracies are two too many and that they should be phased out because they have ceased to serve any purpose. Funding should go to schools, not systems.

Government should do what needs to be done at the centre (deliver curricula, conduct efficient and systematic student evaluation, and provide fair funding), leaving school policy to be developed by individual schools.

Parents, not politicians or officials, should have the responsibility of choosing the school that they believe best suits their children.

It is strange indeed that a government which calls itself con-

servative and claims to support the family should be so repelled by the prospect of parents actually having a say in the education of their own children.

Judging by its actions, the government wants a statist educational monopoly. That used to be the socialists' dream, but even they (except in Canada) are changing. Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair in England has added Muslim schools to the religious and other choices already available.

Just as England, Australia, a few American states, and the most academically successful Canadian provinces have all largely abandoned progressive education, so too have they abandoned the monopoly model of education. Perhaps educational travel should be added to the Minister's curriculum.

*(Dr. Holmes is professor emeritus at OISE and the author of The Reformation of Canadian Schools.)*