

CONSPIRING AGAINST THE SCHOOL SYSTEM.

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The declaration by The Free Press that, in its opinion (it expressly stated that it spoke only for itself), the time had come to exempt the towns and cities of Manitoba from the operation of the bilingual provisions of the Public Schools Act, except where there are already vested rights in this connection, has created a decided furor in the camp of the enemies of our public school system.

In point of fact, there is nothing new in this position which The Free Press has avowed. It has been stated in these columns many times that any attempt to enforce the bilingual provisions in the towns and cities of Manitoba, and particularly in Winnipeg, must result in the immediate exclusion of these localities from the operation of the Act.

The bilingual clauses of the Schools Act have been on the Statute Book since 1897. With the exception of St. Boniface, there is no city or town in Manitoba in which an attempt has been made to compel bilingual teaching in the schools. The law has been invoked only in rural settlements, where non-English-speaking races are in the majority.

There are now, however, signs that a concerted attempt is to be made to grind the operations of the law into the urban centres. In some of the country towns pressure is being applied, so far unsuccessfully, to bring about bilingual teaching. To date the School Boards have resisted the pressure and the applicants have not thought it discreet to invoke the law, which is specific in its provisions, lest it should be followed by an explosion of popular indignation which would bring down the whole fabric of bilingualism in Manitoba.

There is reason to believe, however, that there is a growing disposition on the part of the upholders of bilingualism to insist upon their legal rights and trust to their political power to save them from unpleasant consequences.

In Winnipeg our public school system could be absolutely wrecked by a demand by the people of the various nationalities resident here that the privileges conferred upon them by the statute be put into operation. The law says that where in any school there are ten children of any particular nationality, the parents of these children can demand bilingual instruction in English and in their own tongue. By the Coldwell amendments of 1912 every schoolroom is defined as a school. What, then, would be the result if in the districts in Winnipeg in which there are non-English-speaking elements of population the law should be applied in its letter?

There are schools in the north end of Winnipeg in which in every grade the statutory right for the instruction of pupils not only in English, but in Ruthenian, in Polish, and in some cases in a third language as well, is dormant, ready to be invoked at a moment's notice. There are also many schools in which bilingual teaching in German or Icelandic or Italian or Yiddish could be enforced as a legal right. If the demand for such teaching were made, the Winnipeg School Board would have no legal defence for a refusal to consent to a course of action that would reduce our whole public school system to absolute chaos.

The impracticability of applying the bilingual provisions to the public schools as they now exist in Winnipeg is so obvious that it is not probable that any concerted attempt to bring this state of affairs about would be made, excepting as a means to a much-desired end. That end would be the adoption by the Winnipeg School Board of the Coldwell amendments in the spirit in which they were framed. Here we come near to the secret intention of these amendments, placed upon our Statute Book as the result of a secret cabal, for the purpose of hamstringing the public school system of the city of Winnipeg.

Should the School Board fall in with the plans of the Minister of Education and those in whose behalf the amendments were drafted, we would have scattered over the city of Winnipeg a considerable number of separate schools. They would be separate schools not only on the basis of religion, but on the basis of language as well. Each of these schools would be a bilingual separate school. One set of schools French would be taught, in another Ruthenian, in another Polish, in another German.

The tendency would be for the families to which the pupils of the various nationalities belong to flock together in the proximity of their own schools, and we should have, as a result, racial and religious citadels, in which a spirit of undue nationalism would be systematically developed.

The tacticians of the movement are considering the advisability of putting pressure upon the Winnipeg School Board to force them to accede to the plan embodied in the Coldwell amendments by threatening, if the School Board remains obdurate, to invoke the powers of the bilingual provisions of the Public School Act, with its resulting confusion and dislocation of the public school system.

It seems to The Free Press that it would be wise, before the damage is done, to remove the weapon with which our public school system in the city of Winnipeg might be destroyed. It is probable, of course, that the political parties will, for prudential reasons, fight shy of so drastic a remedy, hoping that fear of the consequences will restrain the promoters of this movement from proceeding with their plans. No doubt, in view of the possibilities of serious trouble to themselves, the Government will give semi-official intimation that action upon the proposed lines would be most dangerous.

The Free Press's advice to the people of Manitoba is to be on the alert for possible eventualities. This is an issue which far transcends ordinary politics. If it is precipitated by action of the nature indicated, other political considerations must be put to one side until it is settled finally by being settled right. Nothing less than the whole future of Canadian civilization in the West is involved.