

A Mennonite View Of Bilingual Situation

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Our province is again in the midst of an agitation over a school question. Twenty-five years ago, or so, we had the agitation over separate schools; today we have the agitation over bilingual schools. If a question like this is to be settled aright it must be studied in all its bearings and there must be a disposition to be just and fair. Where the interests of different sections of the population of a country clash there must be a willingness of each opposing faction to get the viewpoint of the other and to weigh calmly its contentions. It is particularly desirable in this question that each party try to put itself in the position of the other, endeavor to understand it all, and above all, to be reasonable. To take a position pro or con on such a question, merely from bias or from preconceived unsubstantiated notions, would be unworthy of an intelligent man. If we want to be fair to the other side we should also not judge it from the words or acts of extremists, but should rather find out what the main body wants.

As the Free Press, with unceasing repetition and increasing emphasis is contending for the abolition of bilingual teaching and as no presentation of the other side, which has gone fully into the various phases of this question, has appeared in its columns, I shall endeavor to present some reasons why the government should not be hasty in this matter and abolish bilingual teaching altogether.

Present Clause Must Go.

I want to say in advance that I am not going to contend for the retention of that feature of the present school law that makes it obligatory upon the school authorities to appoint a bilingual teacher when the parents of ten school children in a district demand it. I shall not contend for the teaching of a second language to the detriment of the English language. I shall absolutely not contend for the furnishing of an opportunity in our schools to foster foreign national sentiment, and I shall certainly not contend for the preposterous proposition that the government of an English-speaking country shall educate teachers to teach foreigners in their foreign tongue. But I shall contend for the privilege to teach a second language in communities where there is a practically unanimous sentiment for it and where the trustees can find legally qualified teachers to give such instruction. I shall try to be reasonable. In addition I might state that I feel confident that I am voicing the sentiment of the progressive Mennonites with whose educational interests I have identified myself.

The teaching of his native language to his children is a duty which the foreigner owes to himself, to his children, and to the greater good of the state. Put yourself in the position of a foreigner or one who has grown up in this country without any knowledge of the English language. Let his children attend only a monolingual English school. Here they learn to read and write only in English. The children grow up and in the course of time leave home. Mother would like to hear from them. The children write, but only in English. Mother can't read English. She must take the letter of her child to some neighbor to have it interpreted for her. Then she wants to write to her daughter, may be some things of a very private nature, things that are not for other's eyes and ears. No way out, she will have to draw a third party into her secrets, a person who can write to her daughter in English, for her daughter cannot read a letter written in her mother's tongue. Isn't that sad?

Question of Church Services.

Again as Christian parents—and many foreigners are very devout and sincere Christians—they want to give their children the proper religious training. They want to take them along to church and worship with them. They want to put their children in possession of that faith which has been so precious to them. Of course, their church services are conducted in their language, a foreign tongue; their hymns are written in that tongue and the preacher preaches in that tongue. But their children cannot join in the singing of their hymns and they can but imperfectly understand the preaching, for the language of the pulpit is quite different from the language of the home. What follows? The children find the church service very tedious, and instead of a growing attachment to the church there is a growing estrangement from it. Finally, parents and children cannot worship God together. Isn't that sad, too? You say, let these children attend services that are conducted in a language which they have learned to understand in school. Would you send your 10 or 12-year-old children out to seek pastures for themselves? If you do, you are an unnatural parent. The chances are that in such cases the children would find the street the most congenial pasture. It surely is a calamity if parents permit conditions to shape themselves in such a way that it becomes impossible, or at least very difficult, for them to be the guides of their children to find their God and their Savior.

You say such parents may still exert their religious influence in their home. Do you know to what narrow limits the opportunity for that sometimes dwindles down? The writer has found families of foreigners on this continent where there was no communication between parents and children by means of a common language. The parents spoke in their native language to their children and the children would answer in English. None could use the language of the other. They understood each other as long as no one ventured beyond the affairs of the household. The exchange of views on social, moral or religious topics lay beyond the range of the possible. Instead of a wide bridge over which freighted teams laden with the rich treasures of heart and mind could pass to and fro, there was only a frail plank to walk on. How much treasure do you think could be carried over that? There is none too much wholesome influence in our country; there is none too much religious influence exerted upon our young people. Does it not behoove us to keep all channels and avenues of such influence open, and cherish and husband every little contribution that might be made toward the increase of this saving and preserving force of our nation?

I therefore contend that the government would lay a hardship upon the struggling foreign settler and indirectly diminish a source of supply of moral and religious force if it forbade the teaching of a second language in the public schools.

Cultural Value.

The teaching of a second language is of great cultural value. Goethe, that great student of the human soul, has said: "A person who does not know another language knows nothing of his own." Take this with

a grain of salt; still there is a good deal of truth in it. Our conceptions become clearer and more defined by contrasts and comparisons. The study of another language necessitates that constantly. The grammar of our native language becomes quite a different thing to us after we have compared it with the grammar of some other language. Our versatility in expression becomes greater, our appreciation of the force of certain construction becomes keener the more varied the forms of expression which have come under our observation and study. It is a matter of common knowledge among educators that students who have had bilingual training excel in composition students with only monolingual training. The bilingual Mennonite Collegiate Institute of Gretna has at various times sent students to the Winnipeg colleges and more than a proportionate number of these have stood at the head of their classes in English composition.

The writer has in his possession a report from the superintendent of the schools of Cincinnati, where, in part of the schools, monolingual and bilingual classes were taught concurrently. He says that repeatedly teachers of English composition would come to him and ask to have those classes assigned to them where the children learned two languages, for they could in these classes secure better results in English composition than in the others. The notion which some people seem to have that to the extent to which a second language is taught to that extent the English language must be neglected is entirely erroneous. I maintain, therefore, that with a properly qualified and rightly intentioned teacher in charge of the school the English language stands to gain from the teaching of a second language.

Next as to culture proper. Each language has a soul of its own. There is a something indefinable and yet distinctly impressing us imbedded in each language. Let us say it is the composite soul of a nation that is speaking to us. Is it something that is worth while listening to? Is it worth while opening one's heart to receive an influence from it? Surely that soul, which is the growth of ages, must carry a depth, a richness with it, a variety of highly developed attributes, an individuality that must be highly attractive for us. It is an education for us to come in contact with a great personality or a strongly developed character. To come in contact with the soul of another nation cannot but be attractive and have a stimulating and, maybe, ennobling influence upon us; it will have its distinct effects upon our mental outlook, our feelings, and our sympathies.

Cross Fertilizations.

We prize it as a wise provision for our Creator that he has given the child a father and a mother—two souls with distinct characteristics to influence him. We pity the child that grows up without a mother, and we pity the child that grows up without a father. Might we not almost say we pity the individual whose course of education has been such as to deprive him of the rich experience which the coming in contact with the soul of another nation will bring him? In a wider aspect, a nation needs the contact with another nation if it is to be healthy, vigorous and progressive. There must be a process of cross-fertilization by the exchange of the products of mind and soul. This exchange can take place only through individuals, but let these individuals be as numerous as possible. Let me plead for a broad culture and for extended opportunities to enrich the mind!

I like to think of this country as cultivating a common language—the English language. But I also like to think of this country as having among its citizens a large number who know French, another large number who know German, others who know Polish, Ruthenian and any other language whose literature is worth reading. This would open wide avenues of culture and make our national life richer. The young people thus broadened, and with perhaps more or less distinctly developed characteristics, will meet in factories and stores, their paths will cross in various professions and callings, they will rub against each other in various ways, and what each can be to the other, and what each can give to the other, will be more than it could have been if their education had been along narrower and more restricted lines.

Thinks It Would Benefit.

The retention of the privilege of bilingual teaching will not retard, but rather, hasten the progress of education in the communities of foreigners. If a school is to be a success in a community it must appeal to the people of that community. If parents do not like the way a school is conducted, their children will soon find it out, and if the parents are indifferent, and if the children and their parents are indifferent the teacher will likely become indifferent, too. On the other hand, if the parents feel that the school just meets their wants they will encourage their children, and the encouraged children will encourage their teacher to put forth his best efforts. In which school will the inspector find most progress? Such attitude, as first described, would, no doubt, be taken by all the people who are anxious for bilingual teaching, if that privilege were taken away from them. Where would be the gain?

Whether or not attempts would be made in other settlements of foreigners to supplant the public schools by private schools, I am not in a position to tell, but I know that the Mennonites will feel strongly to act in that direction. They would rather leave the country than give up their language. The establishment of private schools would mean poorer paid teachers and, as a consequence, poorer teaching. What would the government do in such cases? Send dragoons out to force the people? They don't do that in Russia, and they don't do it in Prussia, and it would be a sad day for fair Manitoba, with a "liberal" government at the helm, if such harsh proceedings should be instituted here.

Under the liberal provisions of the present school law some workers have succeeded to arouse considerable enthusiasm for good schools among a section of the Mennonites. They have become so ambitious to get good teachers for their schools that they have established two institutions in which bilingual teachers are trained. These have for some years turned out third and second class teachers, who, of course, pass the regular proscribed examinations. This year the Institute at Gretna has even undertaken to prepare a class of candidates for the first class teachers' examination. Their ambition is to make their schools the best in the province. Now take away from them the privilege of teaching

a second language in their schools—a privilege which they have never abused—and then come and see a disappointed and dejected people! Too bad to kill such noble ambition, isn't it?

Now, whether or not the discouragement in other foreign settlements will be greater or less than among the Mennonites, there, no doubt, will be some. What possible advantage, may it be asked, could there be gained for the schools in English-speaking districts if bilingualism were abolished? None, absolutely none. If, then, there is no gain at other places to offset the dis-

couragement in the bilingual districts, the province stands to lose on the score of educational progress.

As to National Sentiment.

The retention of the privilege of bilingual teaching will not hinder, but rather promote, the development of a common national sentiment. This is a startling statement. But let us see. If bilingual teaching is banished from the public schools, that will not banish the teaching of foreign languages from the province. The French will find a way of teaching French to their children, the Germans of teaching German to their children, and so on. Some sort of private schools will be established, either to take altogether the place of the public school or to furnish a supplementary education in the desired second language. These schools, not being under the direct supervision of the department of education, would more likely be inclined to combine with the teaching of the foreign language also the inculcation of foreign national sentiment.

These schools will often be taken charge of by recent arrivals from the old countries because, not able to find other employment, they will be willing to serve cheaper than one to whom other opportunities are open in this country. If such a person is not very watchful, he may let himself go the way he has been wound up and preach patriotism for a foreign country. Take, on the other hand, the teacher in a bilingual public school. He must first have had his education in English in some school of this country; he will then, if neglected so far, get the proper setting of his mind in his normal course; he will catch the national spirit at teachers' conventions and other gatherings; and his work will finally be under the supervision of the inspector. There is no reason why, in speaking French or Polish or German to his children, he should not impart to the children a love for this country and a feeling of brotherhood for all members of this nation.

"Some Extremists."

The solidarity of sentiment will not be secured by forced uniformity, but rather by the promotion of happiness and contentment. If we want to secure such sentiment, then we are heading in the wrong direction by ungenerously passing laws which will make large sections of our people discontented. The Irish do not feel themselves very much attached to the English. Is it because of some difference in the linguistic part of their training? Oh, no; it is because they feel themselves ill-treated by the English. In Switzerland they speak three languages, and many of their schools are bilingual. Are the people on that account at loggerheads with each other? They seem to be pulling nicely together. No doubt, as a freedom-loving people they abhor unnecessary restrictions and are generous towards each other.

It must be admitted that we have in this province among the advocates of bilingualism some extremists who in the zeal for their cause make foolish utterances, such, for instance, as enjoining upon their countrymen the duty of cultivating separate nationalistic sentiments. I think we had better not take the utterances of these men very seriously. They cannot do much harm. Their sentiments may, perhaps, be shared by some who, like them, have been born

in a foreign country. They will find it practically impossible to plant the same sentiment into the generation of their people that grows up here, receives its education in the public schools, and is made acquainted with British and Canadian ideals through the study of British and Canadian history.

"Political and Economic."

The abolition of bilingual teaching in schools would have undesirable political and economic effects. It will cause all the foreigners and the French to bunch together to act as a unit. The question of bilingual teaching will become with them the question of paramount importance. Let the political issue be what it may they will not be open to reasoning. They will not stop to look at a question, but will vote with the party that promises them a favorable consideration of their grievance. The skillful political manipulator will take advantage of this situation, and the result of the election will not register the true opinion of the people. This is not desirable. We should not furnish politicians with such a sure asset. If harsh measures are adopted now, the bilingual question will for a long time remain a source of acrimonious debate, bitterness of feeling, discord and strife. The party that would be disadvantageously affected is too large to be quickly brought into a state of quiet submission. Let us not jeopardize the peace of this our good province!

The adoption of restrictive measures for the schools would also have its detrimental effects upon emigration. It has fallen greatly to the foreigners to break up our prairies, to clear our woodlands, to dig our sewers and build our streets. Much land lies idle yet, much work is to be done yet in the cities. The war is depleting the ranks of our farmers and our laborers. We want newcomers, and we want many of them. Will they come? Reports of an injurious nature have already gone forth into other lands about Canada. Let these foreign settlers now write to their friends about the ungenerous attitude of a large number of the people are taking toward them in the matter of education, let them write about the strife and discord in which we are living, will their friends feel invited to come here and cast their lot with us?

No Trace of Accent.

The law guaranteeing bilingual teaching should not be expunged but changed. What changes should be made might be suggested by a study of the causes why many of the bilingual schools do not show better results in the teaching of English. That the system itself is not the cause is proved by the report, published by the department of education, on the graded schools of St. Boniface, Steinbach and Winkler, as well as the reports on the rural schools of Burwalde, Blumstein, Bloomfield and others, in regard to which schools the reports say that their work in English is very satisfactory. It is further proved by the regular departmental report for 1915, page 149, where Mr. Weldenhammer says about the candidates prepared in bilingual schools: "A marked improvement is noticeable in the English of the candidates who presented themselves for examination this year. Most of these speak English without any trace of foreign accent, and are capable of taking their places in any school of the province."

The unsatisfactory state of some of the other bilingual schools may be due to one or more of the following causes: Recentness of the establishment of the school. Indifference of the people in regard to education. Irregular attendance. Shortness of the school term. Inability of securing a teacher. Employment of poorly qualified teachers. What means could be adopted to remove these causes? The first two cannot be touched by any law. To remove the third and fourth, a suitable law has already been enacted. There remains the question of teachers. Will this be solved by the abolition of bilingual teaching? Perhaps in a limited way. The way Section 224 of the school law reads, any person in the absence of a legally qualified teacher, capable of speaking the desired languages could be employed as a teacher. This has actually been done in many cases. Poor teaching has been the result, and the law is to be blamed for it.

Make it a condition that such bilingual instruction must be given by a teacher who has passed the regular departmental examination and let it further be provided that if no such teacher is to be found then the school must employ an English teacher. This would remedy the evil in many districts. But they tell us that English teachers will not go into the schools among some of the foreigners. Here the department of education should be given authority to deal with such cases as best they can.

Primary Classes.

The law, then, should be changed in such a way as to untie the hands of the department of education so that it may insist on the employment of properly qualified teachers in bilingual schools, the same as in other schools.

To remove the fear that the privilege of bilingual teaching might be abused a time limit for such teaching might be set. In order that this might be sufficient and also enough time be left for the teaching of the regular school branches the condition might be made that the school day, throughout the school term shall consist of six hours and the school term in graded schools be not less than ten months, and in rural schools not less than say eight or nine months, i.e., a month or so longer than it usually lasts. Thus almost enough time would be gained for teaching the extra subject. In primary grades the teacher should have permission to use the native language of the child incidentally at any time of the day.