The Fund for Schools

A Timely Discussion of One of Our Gravest Problems

George J. Trueman, Ph. D.

THERE are in the Maritime Provinces many men and women who know how the schools of these provinces could be greatly improved. They are not backward in giving their views and urging that more rapid progress be made. But all plans suggested require the expenditure of large sums of money, and money is neither very plentiful nor easy to collect. The balance between the taxing authorities and the spending authorities in Canada was not so nicely adjusted as it might have been. The real taxing power rests with the county and municipality on the one hand, and with the Federal Government on the other, and this leaves the province between the two with no definite means of obtaining a large revenue. As a consequence Provincial Secretaries and Treasurers have to devise all kinds of means to bring together enough money to keep up the many and important public services for which they are responsible. When this is considered it is not surprising that Provincial Governments have not provided a larger share of the expense of education.

Where is the money to come from to give us better buildings, better teachers, better supervision, more practical and fuller courses and more years at school for all of our children? It is as useless to seek to raise money by pleasant and easy methods as was the search for the elixir of life or the philosopher's stone. The money must first be earned and then collected in some way by the authorities, local, county, provincial or federal. As to the best and fairest method of collecting it, and as to who are the proper authorities, there is a difference of opinion.

Whatever method is used it must readily appear fair to those concerned. Few people object to paying their share, but all dislike what seems like an imposition and will evade it if within their power. The unit of taxation must be as large as convenient, and the larger it is, the less likelihood of an unfair burden on any one. Thus the parish is a fairer unit than the school district, the county than the parish, the province than the county and the Dominion than the province. At present the tax burden is very unequal. Some districts pay ten times as much tax on a thousand dollars of valuation as do others. Often too after this heavy payment, the school supported is inadequate, and the parent must send the boy away to the village for the short time he can afford it, in order to give him a chance to hold his own. This is not fair, it is not democratic, as it does not give the slighest semblance of equal opportunity, and it cannot continue. There are two remedies for this condition, one to unite districts and form larger taxation areas, and the other and more easily accomplished, is the giving of government grants direct to the municipalities on the basis of need. Something is already done in this way but the greatly varying rates are proof positive that it has not brought about an equalization.

But before an equalization of this kind can be brought about some other changes are necessary. Many municipalities show a high rate of taxation because of large exemptions and low valuation. The exemptions of manufacturing establishments should be stopped and that of school and church property should be limited to that actually occupied by these institutions.

More money may be secured by taxing government property. It is true that such property belongs to all the people, and in taxing it we are taxing ourselves. It must be remembered, however, that what is needed is an equitable distribution of taxation. The Dominion government collects its revenue from the whole of Canada, and any tax it pays is thus the most widely distributed of any possible Canadian tax. A tax on government railroads, post-offices, and other such property is therefore not only fair but decidedly equalizing in effect. The same argument will apply to property owned by the provincial government, but to a lesser extent.

As property owned by the Dominion Government is exempt from taxation by a provision of the British North American Act, it would require an act of the Imperial Parliament to make such property taxable. The New York State Commission on taxation recently recommended that the Federal government pay local taxes on their property, taking the ground that it was unfair to impose on any local community an expense that belonged to the nation. While in Great Britain government property is not taxed the government acknowledges the justice of the claim and, except in special cases, makes a contribution to the local authorities equal to the local rate. There is no reason why this could not be done in Canada without imperial legislation. Finally, when government railroads and company roads are both so largely represented and in such active competition as in Eastern Canada, the companies owning roads will consider themselves justi-

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