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Third Annual Address

TO THE PEOPLE OF UPPER CANADA.

BY THE

CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS.

MY FELLOW-COUNTRYMEN:—

In presenting to you my annual address at the commencement of 1851, I am not in a position to enter into statistical details in respect to past educational progress; nor is it necessary that I should do so, as my last annual School Report has just been printed by order of the Legislative Assembly, and placed in the hands of each Municipal Council and School Corporation throughout Upper Canada. I will, therefore, on the present occasion confine myself to a few general remarks and practical suggestions.

My first remark relates to the settlement of the general principles and great organic provisions of our school system. It has been a common and not unfounded complaint, that there was nothing abiding, nothing settled in the principles and provisions of our School Law. Perpetual change in a school law is perpetual infancy in a public school system. Permanence and stability are essential conditions of growth, whether in an oak of the forest, or in a system of national education. But the works of man are not like the works of God, perfect at the beginning. The history of all science teaches us, that experiments must precede the principles which they establish; and the period of experiment in any thing is likely to be a period of change as well as of infancy. In no branch of political economy have more experiments been made, and with less progress towards the definiteness and dignity of a science, than in the department of public education. The chief reason I apprehend to be, not that it is more difficult than any other, but that it has received less attention than any other in proportion to its magnitude and importance—that in very few instances has any one man, with zeal and capacity for the task, been permanently set apart to investigate the subject in all its aspects and applications, and to bring definitely and practically before the authorities, and legislators, and citizens of his country, the results of general experience and

careful consideration, and embody them in actual recommendations and measures, and administrative policy. In New York and other States, the succession of temporary State School officers has been accompanied with an almost corresponding succession of school laws; and every confident and adventurous theorist in the Legislature, who had perhaps never been out of the limits of his native State, or read half a dozen school laws, or never studied a school system, in his life, was ready with some new project in which he imagined and insisted was embodied the sum of all human perfection, but which was no sooner tried than abandoned. In the State of New York, after almost annual legislation for nearly forty years, the general provisions of the last amended school law of that State, are, I have been informed, a reënactment substantially and almost *verbatim* of the general provisions of the school law of 1811, which was adopted on the recommendation of an able Committee that had devoted a year to the examination and consideration of the subject—thus coming back to the place of beginning, after having made the whole circle in school legislation. But in Upper Canada, our abnormal state of legislative experiment and change has been less protracted and tedious. We have had the great advantage of our neighbours' experiments and experience, and have reached (and I hope have exceeded) their results in legislation, without the drawbacks of their many trials and disappointments; and some of the material changes in our school law have been required by the introduction of a new system of Municipal Councils; and other portions of our recent school legislation have consisted in the introduction of new and necessary provisions, rather than the repeal of existing ones. The careful inquiry which has been instituted into the whole subject during the last five years, the many consultations which have been held in the several counties throughout the country, the minute and anxious attention which was bestowed upon it by the Government and the Legislature during the last session, all warrant the assurance in the public mind, that no future legislation on the subject of our Common Schools will take place, except as new wants may suggest, and the experience and convictions of the country shall require. I am the more convinced of the correctness of this conclusion from the fact, that every suggestion, whether friendly or hostile, which I have seen in newspapers proposing substitutes for certain provisions of our present school law, has been tried and found unsuccessful in some one of the neighbouring States—a fact of which the projectors might have satisfied themselves, had they investigated the history of school legislation in those States, before undertaking to give lessons on the subject for Upper Canada. It cannot fail to be satisfactory and encouraging to every practical man and friend of education, to enter upon the school duties and interests of a new year with the conviction, that his labours will not be in vain, and that the system to which he shall endeavour to give efficiency will be an abiding agency for the educational development and elevation of his country.

My second general remark refers to the position which our school system and its administration occupy in respect to parties and party interests.

The virus of party spirit is poisonous to the interests of education in any country or neighbourhood, and the clangour and jostling of party conflicts are its funeral knell. It perishes in the social storm, but grows and blooms and bears fruit in the serenity and sunshine of social peace and harmony. It has, therefore, been the policy of the enemies of general education, in any country and of