



TORONTO, FEBRUARY, 1852.

# ORIGIN OF THE PRINCIPLE OF FREE SCHOOLS IN THE CANADIAN SYSTEM.

We observe that the question of *free schools* is engaging more than an ordinary degree of attention on the part of the public Press, but that an erroneous impression exists in the minds of several writers as to the origin of the principle of free schools in our Canadian system. It is assumed to be of recent date, and peculiar to the provisions of the present School Act; and its introduction has been greeted in one or two instances by the cry of "Socialism," and "Communism"—words which, in this instance are but the symbols of selfishness and egotism. In no countries is private property held more sacred, and more effectually protected than in the countries of free schools,—Prussia, Switzerland and the New England States of America. Socialist newspapers do not exist in any free school state of America; they only exist in states where the system of free schools has not yet formed and developed the popular mind.

But it is a great mistake to suppose that the principle of free schools was first introduced into the present Common School Act in 1850, or that it was first advocated by any Canadian statesman who can be suspected of "socialism" or "democracy." It may be satisfactory to all parties if we state the successive steps by which this great principle has become thus far incorporated into our school system.

We may then observe, that with the first communication the Chief Superintendent of Schools made to the Government after his return from his visit to the United States and Europe in 1844-5, he submitted a draft of a School Bill, providing for the introduction of the principle of free schools. That communication was dated the 3rd of March, 1846. The 5th clause of the 27th Section of that draft of Bill, authorised the Trustees to provide for the support of their school either by voluntary subscription or by rate-bill; and the 6th clause of the same Section defined the manner of levying the rate-bills as follows:—"To fix the rate-bill per quarter, and cause it to be made on all the inhabitants of such school section according to the valuation of property, as expressed in the Assessor or Collector's Roll, who shall allow any one of the Trustees or their authorised Collector of such school section in his Township, Town, or City, to make a copy of such Roll as far as it relates to such school section respectively."

The foregoing provision was accompanied by the following explanatory and argumentative remarks:—

"The next important change which I propose is, that the Rate Bill imposed by the Trustees of each School Section, shall be levied upon the inhabitants of each Section, generally, according to property. It is the inhabitants generally who elect the Trustees; it is for the inhabitants generally that the grant is made; and the same principle, I think, ought to be acted upon throughout the system—all having a right to avail themselves of the School.

"I need not say how just and patriotic is this principle: how important it is for the poor, and especially those (as is often the case) who have large families; how much it would lighten the burthen of supporting the schools; how greatly it would increase the attendance of pupils, and, consequently, the blessings of education, and how strictly then would our Schools be public schools. I may observe, that this system obtains in the States of New England, where there are the best common schools in the United States. It is also the Prussian and Swiss system.

"On the other hand, the evils of the present system of School Rate Bill have been brought under my notice from the most populous Townships, and by the most experienced educationists in Canada. When it is apprehended that the Rate-bill will be high, many will not send their children to the school at all; then there is no school, or else a few give enough to pay the Teacher three months, including the Government part; or even after the school is commenced, if it be found that the school is not so large as had been anticipated, and that those who send will consequently be required to pay more than they had expected, parents will begin to take their children from School, in order to escape the Rate-bill, as persons would flee from a falling house. The consequence is, that the school is either broken up, or the whole burthen of paying the Teacher falls upon the Trustees, and often a quarrel ensues between them and the Teacher. I have been assured, by the most experienced and judicious men, that it is impossible to have good schools under the present system of Rate-bill. I think the substitute I propose will remedy the evil. I know of none who will object to it but the rich, and the childless, and the selfish. Education is a public good; ignorance is a public evil. What affects the public ought to be binding upon each individual composing it. In every good government, and in every good system, the interests of the whole society are obligatory upon each member of it."

The important clause of the Bill thus recommended, was approved by the conservative administration to which it was submitted, and strongly advocated by Mr. Attorney General (now Judge) DRAFER, but was opposed and lost in the Legislative Assembly by a majority of 4 or 5. It was the poor man's clause, and the clause of the enlightened patriot; and the loss of it inflicted great injury upon the common schools, besides involving Trustees in great perplexities and embarrassments. But the principle thus first submitted to the consideration of the Government and Legislature in 1846, was again submitted on the 27th of March, 1847, in the Draft of a School Bill for Cities and Towns, and to the School Act of the year previous, so far as to authorise Municipal Councils, on the application of Trustees, to provide for the entire support of a School Rate upon property. The draft of Bill containing these provisions was first submitted to the Hon. H. SHERWOOD, the Attorney General, and the Hon. J. H. CAMERON, the Solicitor General, and the principle of the provisions referred to carefully explained. These gentlemen both pronounced the principle just and patriotic; the Bill was introduced into the Legislative Assembly by the Hon. J. H. CAMERON, and passed without opposition. The two sections of the Bill containing the provision for free schools, were accompanied by the following remarks—remarks as applicable to the general questions of free schools now as they were in March, 1847:—

"The Ninth and Tenth Sections embody an important principle which lies at the very foundation of a sound system of public instruction, and which is essential to the *universal* education of any country—it is the principle of school Rate-bill, as well as school Assessment, according to property, both in town and country. In my communication of the 3rd of March last, I dwelt at some length on the importance of this principle, and referred to the testimonies of experienced educationists in different parts of Upper Canada as to the impossibility of ever having good Schools, much less rendering them accessible to all the youth of the land, under the past and present system of school Rate-bill—a system which has never been admitted in the State of Massachusetts, where common school education is nearly, if not quite, universal among the poorest classes of the community. The principle embodied in the ninth and tenth sections of the accompanying draft of bill was embodied in the original draft of the common school Act—was sanctioned by the late Governor General in Council, and was advocated in the House of Assembly by the Honourable Attorney-General Draper; but the proposition being new, and being apparently misunderstood by some, and coming in contact with wealthy selfishness, was lost by a small majority. But since the last Session of the Legislature, several District Councils have expressed themselves in favour of this principle, and the subject has repeatedly been brought before me by Trustees. The principle of school-rate according to property is recognized and acted upon in respects to Assessments imposed by each District Council for the raising of a moiety of the school fund, and for the erection of School Houses; but in