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FRENCH IN ONTARIO

BY

HON. N. A. BELCOURT

L. L. D., K. C., P. C.



REPRODUCED FROM THE UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE

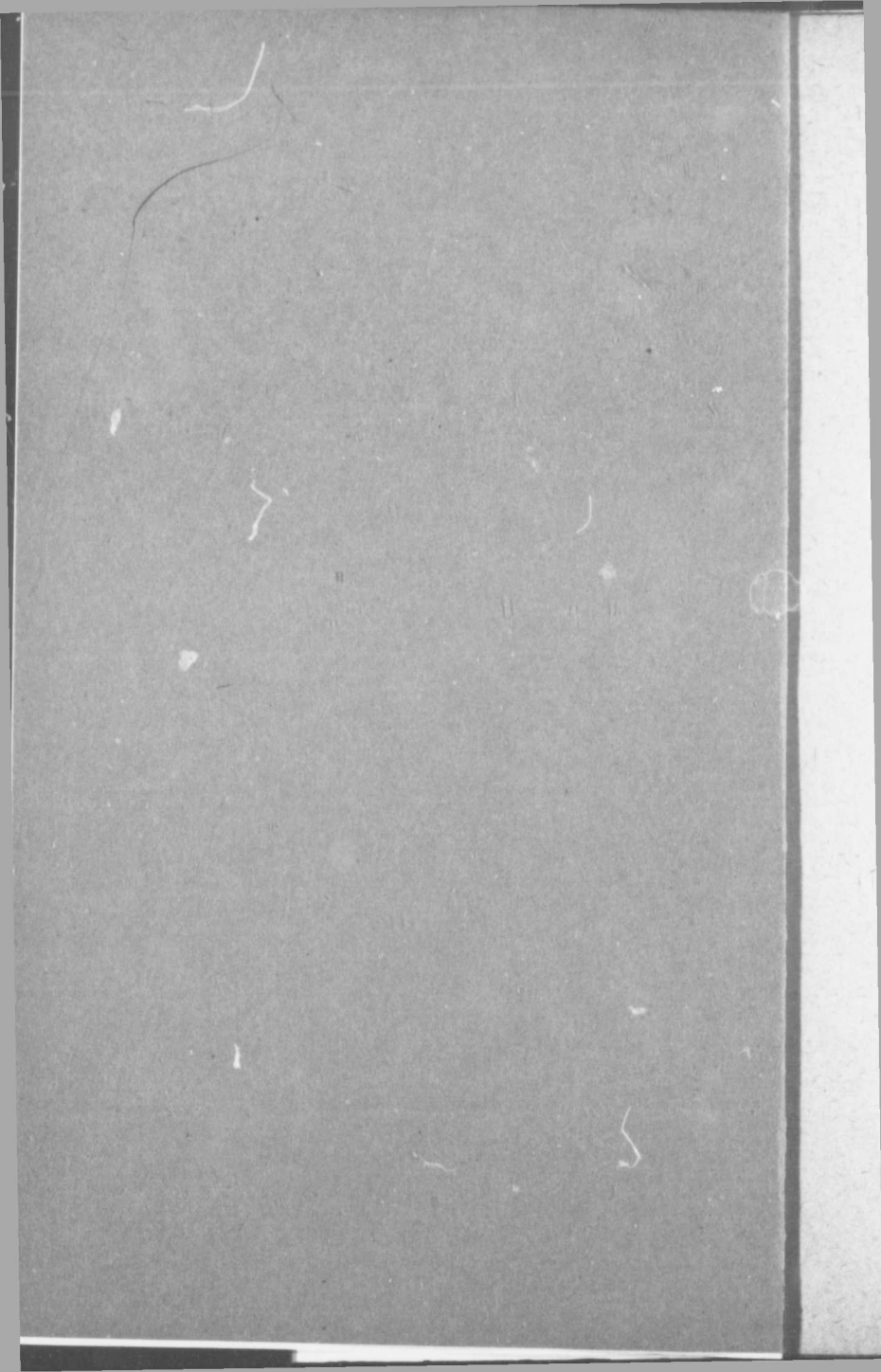
DECEMBER 1912



OTTAWA

IMPRIMERIE DU "DROIT"

1913



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FRENCH IN ONTARIO

The school question, which has the habit of arising to trouble the English-speaking provinces of Canada—it has no habitat in the province of Quebec—has again broken out; this time in Ontario, over Regulation No. 17, recently issued by the Department of Education. A controversy has followed, in which have figured, and quite properly, considerations of a legal or constitutional character, of natural law and justice, of pedagogic rules, of conscientious and sentimental ethics, of sound policy. Unfortunately the discussion has not been free from ignorance, suspicion and prejudice; and it has been treated at times with little, or no common sense.

The facts are these: Canada is a bilingual country. Some of us, about one-third of the whole, located, it is true, principally in Quebec, but with considerable groups in all but one of the Canadian provinces, were first taught, and our children will first learn, to speak and to think in the French language. At least ninety per cent, of the French-speaking Canadians also speak, can think in, even can write—and tolerably well—the English language also. All Canadians of French origin, with no exception, desire and intend that all their children shall acquire at least a working knowledge of the language of the majority.

But we are equally determined that they shall also learn, and preserve, the language of our forefathers, because that beautiful language was the only one spoken,

besides the Indian dialects, on the greater part of this northern hemisphere for a century and a half, and in it was written the history, unparalleled for single-mindedness, heroic endeavour and brilliant achievement, of French civilization and Christian evangelization on this continent. It is our language, part of ourselves, and of our very souls. We know that with it we are better off, better equipped for the duties and pleasures of life; its use hinders, molest, or interferes with no right or privilege of others; we believe that it is our inalienable right to have our money for educational purposes spent as we deem best for our children; and we know that we should, and would, deserve and receive the contempt of our right-thinking and enlightened co-citizens if we abandoned our mother tongue.

These are the facts; this is the condition which confronts Canadians. Opposed to it, cherished by some, condemned by most, is the theory of only one language for all.

Now what is this troublesome Regulation No. 17? Shorn of its prolixity, reduced to its real size and significance, it means, and it can and does mean, nothing else than the proscription of the French language as the language of instruction and communication beyond the first form, and the suppression of the study of that language beyond one hour each day in the other forms of all the bilingual schools controlled by the

Department of Education for Ontario; such study and the time allowed for it, however, to be always and completely subject to the approval and direction of the Chief Superintendent of Education and supervising inspectors appointed by the Department for the purpose of enforcing this regulation.

In order to remove any possible doubt as to the real meaning, intention, and purpose of the regulation, the educational authorities have appointed for its due and drastic enforcement, with absolute control and unlimited discretion as to the quantity and quality of the French to be taught, supervising inspectors who may know very little, if anything at all, of the French language; and it may be quite fairly added that they are not expected to; in fact, they may care still less for that language. If the Chief Superintendent or these supervising inspectors so decide, the study of French may be limited to five minutes daily. The object and purpose of the regulation and the means adopted to ensure its designed and inevitable result are evident.

The appreciation of this regulation should be approached and dealt with, without ascribing any motive or desire which is not unmistakably disclosed by the fair reading and clear meaning of the regulation itself. We must also assume that the provincial authorities have acted in good faith, whatever may be thought of their judgment, in dealing with the problem. Nor should those who oppose the regulation from deep conviction, to say nothing of sentimental considerations, be taxed with ulterior motives or with the purpose solely of defying the educational authorities. They have

but one object, but one desire; and it is irrevocable and unchangeable, namely, the preservation of one of the best parts of their ancestral heritage.

One may even concede that there may be something to be said for the view, more correctly the theory, or better still, the delusion, held or promoted by some of a single language for the whole Canadian community. And however convinced all enlightened men must be that such an end is not desirable, even were it possible, some respect is due to those who sincerely believe that for the sake of simplicity, uniformity, or convenience, the language of the majority should be the only one taught in our schools. And it is but fair to state that no other good or valid reason has been given as justification for the recent regulation. If it cannot be supported on the ground of uniformity or convenience, it has no sound argument in its favour. The proscription of the French language as a vehicle of instruction in many parts of the province of Ontario cannot be justified from any point of view except, perhaps, from the narrow and impracticable one to which reference has been made.

The constitution, natural law and justice, every rule of sane pedagogy, rights acquired by the minority, British fair play, sound policy, and last, but not least, common sense, all stand out in unison against it. The constitution has decreed the equality of the English and French languages in the treatment of all matters of Canadian-wide concern. If it were otherwise, the views, aims and aspirations of one-third of the population of Canada would find but an imperfect and inadequate

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means of expression, and a great many Canadians would be unable to give the full measure of their utility in the discharge of their public duties, and could not exercise in all their fulness their rights in the parliamentary, municipal, and many other fields of public activity. The proscription of French as a vehicle of instruction and its suppression as a matter of study in the bilingual schools is not only a violation of common sense but also a clear violation of the spirit—if not the actual letter—of the constitution.

By natural law the child has as much right to his parents, language as to the name, the traditions, the property, the virtues, and the qualities he may inherit from them. The attempt to destroy or to deprive him of any of these is abhorrent to civilization. Primarily the duty to educate the offspring is on the parent, and the inevitable corollary is the right of the parent to decide for his child the quantity and quality of that education. The duty of the state is to provide the organization necessary for the purpose, and, if necessary, to compel the parent to give to his child the minimum of education which every child should receive. Both, in their own respective spheres, have a distinct and separate duty which cannot be encroached upon by either, without violating, on the one hand, the universally recognized principles of natural law, or, on the other, the legitimate field of government. The elementary rules of the right of property require that the fruit of one's labour and activity shall be applied by the owner in such a way as he may decide, provided he does not contravene moral law and does not interfere with the rights of others.

Applying the principles of natural law and justice to the matter in hand, it follows that the school taxes should be used to furnish the kind of education which the parent may think best. The law may command, and it is strictly in accordance with natural law and justice, that the parents shall give to their children, the very best possible education. But is it not most unjust and arbitrary for any government, in a bilingual country like Canada, where in all matters of national interest and concern the French and the English languages are placed on an absolutely equal footing by the constitution, to decree that the school rates of the minority, whether of the English in Quebec or of the French in the other provinces, shall be used for the suppression of that minority's language? Such a violation of natural law and common justice as the attempt to destroy the child's mother-tongue has never before this been perpetrated by any legitimate government, in the British Empire at least.

It may not be amiss to refer here to the fact that in Ontario a large portion of the school rates contributed by all separate school supporters is diverted to the use of public schools in the form of taxes paid by semi-public institutions, such as steam or electric railways, transportation, light, heat, power, and similar companies; and by industrial, financial, and commercial corporations, as well as taxes paid on buildings throughout the provinces leased by the government of Canada for administrative or other purposes. And, as if this were not enough, it is now threatened that if the French-speaking Canadians in Ontario persist—and there can be no doubt that they

will—in their present attitude that the French language shall, in certain well defined parts of the province, be the vehicle of instruction, the whole of their school tax contributions will be diverted to the use of the public schools, and they shall, furthermore, be deprived of the schools built and paid for and supported out of their own moneys. The majority may possibly—though it is very doubtful—so ordain; but who will say that such would not constitute a flagrant and intolerable denial of justice ?

Does not every one know that the child's mind and heart are more readily and more certainly reached through the medium of the maternal tongue? Is it not a fact demonstrated time and again, that the French-Canadian can, and does, learn at the same time and with great facility, not only without any detriment, but with marked advantage to his general studies, both the English and French languages ? It is also a fact experienced many times by bilingual Canadians that the French-Canadian child can, and does, learn the use of the English language more easily than he can acquire the knowledge of good French. In many of the schools, colleges, and convents of the province of Quebec and in Ontario, children of both sexes, to whom is given but an hour or so daily of tuition in English, are generally found able to speak and write in English as well as most of the children frequenting schools in both provinces where only English is taught. The French-Canadian's real difficulty with reference to the English language is only one of accent, and that difficulty does not exist for the child; it is such only for the adult.

The universal and constant experience in all countries with two or more languages has demonstrated the very great advantage, in truth the necessity, of using the mother-tongue as the language of instruction. It would be only wearisome to cite the numerous authorities in Europe and Canada who have long ago removed any doubt as to the correctness of this view.

Why were the bilingual schools of Ontario organized and maintained in the past by the government of Ontario, if not for the purpose of making the French language the vehicle of instruction? What other meaning, what other object, can they have ? And is it not a cruel mockery to continue these schools, under that very name, for the purpose of suppressing French as the language of instruction and communication? Not only have the educational authorities in that province passed sentence of death upon the French language in the schools, they have committed the execution of this sentence to the bilingual teachers who will be required to strangle French speech and French thought. And to make sure that death will ensue, the government has appointed supervising inspectors who know nothing of the French language, to supervise the gruesome task. Why not suppress the name as well as the thing itself ?

Why the English-speaking people of Canada, with all the facilities at their command, do not learn the French language, as the educated in England, for instance, do, with much less opportunity and facility, is a question perhaps deserving of the attention of our educationists and publicists, and the solution of it would relieve the

curiosity, at least, of not a few Canadians.

Considerations based on sentimental or conscientious ethics, national idiosyncrasies or temperament, which are always of a controversial character, had better be left untouched, as the purpose of the present article is to appeal only and simply to the reason of those who will do the writer the honour of reading and weighing his words. Is uniformity of language necessary to the establishment, progress, development, prosperity, or unity of any nation? Gibbon tells us that in the Roman Empire "those who united letters with business were frequently conversant with Greek and Latin, and it was almost impossible in any province to find a Roman subject of liberal education, who was at once a stranger to the Greek and to the Latin language." Canada might well follow this example, nearly two thousand years old. If it is not followed it will not be the fault of the French-speaking population of Canada, nearly the whole of which is now truly bilingual. Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, and other prosperous and united nations of Europe, have and teach, side by side, two or more languages.

But what need is there to go outside of the British Empire? Guernsey, Wales, Jersey, the Isle of Man, South Africa, and India, the latter with about one hundred and fifty languages, often as distinct from each other as English from Greek, or French from German,—have officially recognized, and are teaching concurrently, and in every respect treating with complete and perfect equality, two or more languages. And yet no one in these countries considers that the progress or unity of the nation

is thereby endangered, hindered, or retarded. Homogeneity of race or language is not any more essential to national unity in Canada than it has been found to be with most of the countries of Europe.

Let us not forget that union is strength, but uniformity is not union. Instead of being a matter for regret, it should be a source of congratulation, that there is to be found in Canada the diversity of the English and French races and the variety of character and achievement resulting therefrom. Instead of being an obstacle to progress and advance in all the spheres of human energy, this diversity constitutes, on the contrary, its best stimulant, besides adding to the picturesqueness of national life. From this diversity there naturally results laudable emulation and friendly rivalry. How monotonous would be our national existence, how sterile in many fields, if we all resembled one another in our physical features, mentality and character, if we all spoke and read but one language, if we all had the same tastes and habits, and if we all went through life in the manner of gregarious creatures. Consider how much poorer the intellectual life of the continent would be by the suppression of the French language, French history and names, French landmarks and traditions, French sentiment and enthusiasm, and last, but not least, French art and French logic.

We all know that the idea of, or the inspiration for, this regulation did not originate or germinate in the Department of Education itself. We know that its promulgation has been demanded and its enforcement is now exacted by

certain people in and outside of that province. To others had better be left the appreciation of the motives which underlie this open and aggressive attitude, which it is not proposed to in any way here deal with. Reference, however, may be permitted to the fact that the agitation for the suppression of the French language in Ontario is largely based upon the fear that some day—in the far off dim future—the French-speaking Canadians may be in the majority in the province. The ever increasing migration of French-Canadians from Quebec to Ontario, and the prolific increase of population by natural means, which is so marked among them, with the concurrent and probably equivalent migration of English-speaking Canadians from Ontario to the western provinces, are pointed to as conditions which will bring about a reversal of the present majority. This fear has been voiced more than once.

What are the facts? For every French-speaking Canadian in Ontario there are ten English-speaking Canadians. Are we to be told and are we to believe, that this overwhelming majority is to be overcome? However puerile this fear, are French-speaking Canadians to be expected to stand by and, without protest, without struggle, allow their mother-tongue to be suppressed? And are they to be expected through their taxpayers, their teachers, and their school commissioners, to be made the executioners of this decree of extermination? The answer was not slow in coming; and it may be taken from one who knows the situation, who has been in close contact with the various French-Canadian groups of Ontario, that the matter has been well and se-

riously weighed by them, and that the determination not to accept the ignominious role assigned to them, has been, and will continue to be, irrevocable.

But suppose the wholly unexpected, the highly improbable, should ever happen, and the present majority should be reversed. What of it? And why should French-speaking Canadians be denied the benefit of the law of the survival of the fittest, which, if it holds good for, should also hold good against, the English-speaking Canadian? And there need be no apprehension in any quarter as to the conduct of a French-Canadian majority in this or any other province. It would be used, as it has been, and is now being used, in the province of Quebec, that is, as every one knows, in a liberal and generous spirit.

During the congress of the French-Canadians of Ontario held in the month of January, 1910, at a public meeting in the Russell Theatre, in Ottawa, speaking in the name of and for the whole French-Canadian element of Ontario, in the presence of the Prince Minister of Canada and several members of the governments of Canada and Ontario, as well as many representative English-speaking Canadians, I had the honour to utter with unmistakable approval, the following words:

“Is it because we chant the national anthem of the British Empire in our national language, as well as in the language of the majority, that we are or shall become worse subjects of that Empire? Is it because, in both French and English, we proclaim everywhere, here, in England, in France, and foreign lands, our unshaken attachment to

British institutions, that we should have a narrower conception of our obligations towards Canada and Great Britain and less desire to fulfil them in the most complete manner? Why then should we be refused the pleasure and the advantage of knowing well and of speaking, our children and ourselves, the language to which our mothers initiated us, the language in which we have learned to think, to pray, and in which we can better express the most noble, inspiring sentiments of the heart; affection, love, charity; the language in which we first learned the traditions of our forefathers handed down to us, and that glorious epic of our country's early history, as well as the heroic deeds of our ancestors on this American soil?

"A thorough knowledge of the two languages, English and French, has been the most fruitful and substantial bond of union between the two races that constitute the majority of this country. It was the equal knowledge of English and French that made possible, or rather that produced, the good understanding, the concord and the union between the two races; without that two-fold knowledge neither one nor the other of the two elements could have created or maintained that understanding and that union so essential to the prosperity and the future of Canada.

"Despite the apprehensions or the prophecies of certain people, the British government firstly, and our government later on, were not mistaken in sanctioning the offi-

cial use of the French language and placing it on an equal footing with the English. And the proof of this is written in almost every page of our history since the cession; only the wilfully blind—and, happily, they are becoming more and more scarce—will not allow themselves to be convinced of this fact. Far from affecting our duty or hindering our devotion to the British Crown and British institutions, the free use of our mother-tongue, with the recognition of our laws and our institutions, has been the pure source whence we drew the will, the courage, and the valour which enabled us more than once to save this country for the Empire. Had the French language not been made equal before the law in the past, I would not hesitate to say that to-day it would be an act of simple justice, and of profound political wisdom, to recognize it as such..."

Can it not now be added with equal truth and moment that, if the right or privilege claimed by the French-Canadians of Ontario, to have their mother-tongue used as the vehicle of instruction and communication in their bilingual schools, had not been before and since Confederation recognized—and never officially denied in Ontario until recently—in view of the conditions now prevailing in that province and the great increase in French-Canadian population therein, sound public policy demands and would amply justify such recognition and the adoption of practical means to ensure its free and proper exercise?