

SPEECH

OF THE

Honorable Mr. Marchand

ON

Elementary Education

DELIVERED IN THE LOWER HOUSE LAST SESSION.

An Answer to the Speech of the Premier When He Brought Forward His Resolutions on Public Instruction.

Mr. Speaker,—I believe that we ought, before all things, to give serious attention to the elementary education of this Province. The necessity for this reform has been felt for a long time, and therefore, I regret that the Government has been so tardy in attending to the matter.

The Hon. the Premier informs us that he intends to increase the grant for the common schools, by means of a special fund which will be formed through the sale of 1,500,000 acres of colonization lands to be specially reserved for this purpose; and he asserts that, when all this reserve is sold, the sale price will produce an annual revenue of sixty thousand dollars. But at the same time he informs us that until this transaction, as prolonged as complicated, is accomplished he will add to the common school grant, a sum of fifty thousand dollars per annum.

It would have been better to say at once that this last alternative showed the Government's real intention, and that the first would never be accomplished. A little consideration will serve to show this.

Besides the long delay which there must be before this vast extent of one million

five hundred thousand acres of our public land can be sold, and the proceeds so invested as to produce a fixed income, another difficulty will have arisen which the Hon. Premier has not foreseen; the total sum produced by this sale when it has been effected will not represent the capital necessary to give an annual revenue of sixty thousand dollars which he pretends to provide.

A very simple calculation will show this.

The colonization lands which will be included in this reserve are sold at thirty cents per acre; this represents a capital of \$450,000, producing at 4 per cent., the rate named in the resolutions to this House, an annual interest of \$18,000. It is \$18,000 only, and not \$60,000, which the Government will be able to draw from the capitalized reserve, when after a long delay the sale of all shall have been effected. That is to say that its calculation is not in earnest; so much the less so as the expenses authorized by the sixth resolution would occasion a great reduction of the funds already insufficient, as I have just shown.

Why were we not told at once that this

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sole intention was to put the second alternative into effect? That is to say purely and simply to increase the annual grant for the common schools by fifty thousand dollars. Upon this point I entirely coincide with the hon. gentleman, and the Opposition will willingly join with the Government in considering how to use this money in a way most advantageous to the advancement of the elementary education of our Province.

This is one of those questions which ought to be considered by the members without party spirit. This is what we are disposed to do in advising with the Government as to the means to be used in order to arrive at the desired result.

I observe with pleasure that the Hon. the Premier, in the explanation which he has just given of the question, appears to wish to place it upon neutral patriotic grounds; that is why I do not understand the necessity which he appears to have felt before facing the practical side of his subject, of making declarations of principles, perfectly useless in my opinion.

There is no need for us to give assurances to our people regarding the moral teaching to be given in our public schools; all the needful guarantees are to be found in our laws and there they will remain. The consciences of all may rest in perfect ease so far as that is concerned. Whether the present Government or the party which I have the honor to lead, be charged with the conduct of affairs in the future the same guarantees will be respected. The antecedents of the Hon. Premier, as my own, ought to be sufficiently well-known in this respect and if it were necessary to reassure the public, that I, myself, should make a declaration of principles as the last speaker has believed it to be his duty to do, I would not hesitate to give it in the most positive and clearest manner possible.

We, on this side of the House, are of one opinion in disapproving of "godless" schools. We have moral and religious teaching in our schools and we will keep

The education of the young ought to be,

as the Hon. the Premier has just said, physical, moral and intellectual at the same time; the heart of the child must be cultivated at the same time as his intelligence, and simultaneously in the course of his studies, have instilled into him the principles of Christian morality with such practical knowledge that later he may become a good and useful citizen. Let it be known then once for all that religious instruction will be respected and maintained in our schools. But alongside of this teaching there is that of ordinary secular knowledge; it is, according to my opinion, this part of the system, which is defective and which demands earnest reform, in order that our young people may acquire all that is needed to place them on a level with the youth of the sister provinces, and to be in a position to enter with them on the battle of life. It is from this standpoint alone that we ought to consider, during this discussion, the reforms to be accomplished. We all are in accord that they are needed, we ought to seek for the best means of realizing them,

That which is lacking above all in our elementary education is, method. Without doubt our teachers, male and female, are insufficiently paid, and we ought in augmenting the school grant, to see that those who merit it profit by it by an increase of salary which will encourage them to carry out with energy the difficult career they have chosen. In this career, as in all others, special knowledge is required and to obtain this the teacher must, before undertaking any work, pass through a course of training during which he shall be able to gain such a knowledge of the elementary principles of pedagogy, that he can acquit himself efficaciously in his duties. This preparation is as necessary to him as it is to the professional man, or even the artisan. One cannot become an advocate, doctor or notary, without going through the proper course, as one must serve an apprenticeship before becoming a carpenter, mason or smith. The profession of teaching, the most important perhaps, (insomuch as it is charged with the moral and intellectual training

of the young generation), no less than the other is not exempt from these preliminary studies. Unhappily, they are almost entirely wanting amongst the greater part of our teachers, and especially among the females, in our public schools. Very often a young girl, after some years at school, when from seventeen to eighteen years of age, possessing not the least idea of pedagogy, is put in charge of a large class, some of whom are very little younger than the teacher; as a consequence there is a complete lack of discipline and a defective, methodless teaching which produces deplorably inadequate results when it does not fail altogether.

Here is a great void which we must fill (and it is an urgent reform which is required), by using and attending better to the materials which are ready to hand.

It is useless to hope that we can instil a thorough method into the some six thousand male and female teachers who are in charge of our public schools, in a day; but we could at least use this new subsidy so as to assist them in obtaining a knowledge of the elementary principles of pedagogy, indispensable to the right management, and to the success of a school. A scheme, very simple and by no means costly, has been suggested to me to further this object which I propose that the Government should try.

Our Inspectors of Schools are already required to pay two visits each year to every school in their district, the one at the beginning and the other at the end of the school year. The first is not indispensable and could be usefully replaced by two or three days of conference which the inspector would give to all the teachers in each of his municipalities, the reunion to be held in the most central places in each county of the district. In these conferences the Inspector would deal simply and succinctly with the most practical methods of teaching and he would finish the course by an examination by which he could ascertain the degree of merit of each teacher from the point of view of regular attendance

and the application of that pedagogical teaching which he has endeavored to instil into his hearers, certificates to be given in accordance with results. This condensed teaching would be under the control of the Council of Public Instruction and conformable to such instructions as the Council see fit to issue. Upon the testimony of these certificates, a bounty in the shape of a bonus added to the salary, would be given to such certificated masters and mistresses as have profited most by the lessons; who have made effective use of them in their own schools, and who have been most successful in teaching the various subjects of the approved course of study. By means of this inexpensive plan the personnel of the teaching body would from the first, acquire some idea of those indispensable principles of pedagogy which could be applied in the course of the very first year and thus a distinct advance would occur spontaneously throughout the Province; this advance would be accentuated gradually and surely in school as a consequence of each of the conferences which the teacher attended during his career; no doubt after some years of a training of this kind, regularly followed, all these teachers who are devoted to their work would have so profited by these opportunities as to make themselves competent and thus finish by placing their schools in a satisfactory position of efficiency. And they would be encouraged in this useful work by the prospect of rewards offered to the most meritorious in the shape of an appreciable addition to the yearly salary.

It is not a complete system which I propose; but it affords the means—awaiting something better—of promptly assisting those who wish to profit by a knowledge of those elementary principles of pedagogy which are essential to the right conduct of a school. It would be an immediate and considerable improvement on the existing state of affairs, and one of which the present generation would reap the benefit whilst waiting for a more perfect system. I have no doubt that the consequent success in our country schools

would, to a certain extent, assist in overcoming the discouragement or indifference of a great number of parents who to-day do not insist on the children attending regularly, giving as a reason that they learn nothing and that they simply waste their time at school; a reason only too well founded.

Thanks to this regrettable impression, widespread and general, our elementary schools, with their low attendance, often remain in a condition of lamentable inferiority; thus it is that a very large proportion of the industrious and intelligent youth of our towns and in the country, is deprived of that practical instruction which is essential to advancement and success in whatsoever career is chosen.

The imperative duty laid upon us, as legislators, then is to provide effectually for the raising of the standard of our elementary education, in furnishing the necessary resources and rendering it accessible to all, even those of small means. That is to say that the legislative appropriations for the common schools ought to be increased as far as our financial condition will permit, and that on the other hand the necessary expenses imposed upon families for the instruction of their children

ought to be reduced to the lowest possible figure.

In order to forward the last object, it appears urgent that, under the direction of the Council of Public Instruction, a series of class books, as uniform as possible, may be adopted and furnished to the scholars in all the school districts, so that in going from one school to another they may not be obliged by frequent changes, especially in great industrial centres, to go to the heavy expense of providing afresh.

This simple reform is desirable, not only from an economic point of view in the schooling of the youth of the working classes, but also as a means of obtaining uniformity in the subjects taught in all the schools of the Province.

I am led to make these few suggestions by a sincere desire to assist the Government in the task it has undertaken, that of placing Public Instruction upon a sound footing. And I am in a position to assure it that whatever is undertaken that is useful in this work, will receive the most cordial support from the Liberal party.

If, in the near future, it falls to our lot to preside over the affairs of the Province, we intend to devote special attention to the development of elementary education.

