

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE  
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES  
7<sup>TH</sup> COUNCIL, 53<sup>RD</sup> SESSION

TABLED DOCUMENT NO. 14-53

TABLED ON JUNE 19, 1974



GOVERNMENT OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES  
CANADA

PLEASE QUOTE

FILE.....

TABLED DOCUMENT NO. 14-53

Tabled June -19, 1974

Yellowknife, N.W.T.,  
XOE 1HO,  
15 May, 1974.

TO ALL READERS OF ARCTURUS

"Maybe one day, human decency, honesty and brotherhood will prevail". So states a line in Paul Robinson's article on page 24 of this issue. I would ask you to evaluate in these terms, his vitriolic condemnation of the Department of Education, which was seen by members of that department only after the magazine had come from the printers.

Knowing Mr. Robinson, I can overlook, or make allowances for, the arrows that he has sent my way, but when he condemns the entire departmental staff in one sweeping, unfounded, and what almost appears to be an hysterical charge, then I feel that I must respond.

I find his article destructive, negative and purposefully morale-shattering, and I do not believe that it can achieve anything of value. It is unjust to the many employees who have a sincere interest in our northern education program. I feel, furthermore, that it is dishonest and unfair to use this magazine as a vehicle for his personal animosity against the Department of Education.

There has been considerable pressure to consign this issue of ARCTURUS to the wastebasket because of what is generally agreed to be irresponsible journalism on the part of a departmental officer. Such action would probably give undeserved status to one man's petulance and frustration. You be the judge!

N. J. Macpherson,  
Director of Education.

OH DEAR,  
I'VE LOST MY



Putting to-gether a few thoughts for this, the last issue of "Arcturus" in this school year, is more than a little difficult. Superficially, I feel that the 'Departmental' thing to do would be to wax lyrical about all of those good things that have transpired, presumably since last August, and conclude by extending 'best wishes' for the fast-approaching summer recess. Oh, and before I forget, I really should thank one and all for their sacrifices, contributions, and generally fine performance in the service of Northern people. Regrettably, in good conscience, I'm unable to carry off that sort of approach. To do so, would be tantamount to acknowledging guilt of what one writer has called "Chamber of Commerce platitudes of social irresponsibility". Thus, if you are looking for something a bit more uplifting and certainly a hell of a lot more cosmetic in its approach to the realities of the North in general, and education, in particular, may I recommend the "Commissioner's Annual Report", or even "Norpinion", although I recognize that the latter is RESTRICTED, for whatever good reasons

24 I've never been able to fathom!

To explain my sombre, even pessimistic attitudes, I shall attribute partial responsibility, at least, to being something of a baseball buff. I have this quotation from old-timer Leo Durocher which keeps nagging at me with increasing regularity, "Nice guys finish last!" And this is one good reason why this piece is difficult to put to-gether. I know as well as the next person that, "Yes, a handful of good things are happening in Northern education." But that's the point. Objectively, and I sincerely hope, rationally speaking, the good things are but a mere handful and, in my opinion, Northern education, in a general sense, is teetering on the knife edge of either moving forward in the direction of implementing basic changes or regressing to the catastrophic practices of the past. In no small measure, I would suggest, that the underlying reason for this precarious state of affairs is to be laid at the door of the "nice guy" mentality that is frustrating, even destroying, any real hopes for significant change.

To support my contention I want to zero-in on specific issues that require the thoughtful consideration of everyone who is willing to go "the second mile" in trying to improve drastically the educational system. Before so doing I should try to be precise in what the term "nice guys" means to me. Although this list is not all-inclusive, "nice guys" can be characterized as follows:

- a) their ability to be all things to all people (remember Abe Lincoln's statement about "You can fool some of the people all of the time.... etc.")
- b) their ability to vacillate - similar but not identical to vaseline which is slippery too, but even more so.
- c) their ability to debate the relative numbers of angels than can stand on the heads of pins as opposed to an ability to confront and resolve prime issues.

- d) their 'gut reaction' to preserving the status quo. It is one thing to appear to be liberal in thought when it doesn't really matter (e.g. in the confines of one's office or living room) but when the chips are down (i.e. in the face of public or administrative pressure) it is safer to resort to the tried and supposedly true rather than to run any risks. Better to play the game with the 'devil you know than the devil you don't' is symbolic in this regard.
- e) their ability to climb the bureaucratic ladder through their devotion to preserving their own skins. "A good fellow is one who does what he is told; follows proper channels; gets on the team; or, to put it mildly, does as little as possible of consequence and thereby causes no waves, or ripples, for that matter."

Now, let's get on with the examination of issues, items of importance to the futures of all Northern peoples.

The first issue to be examined is the re-writing of the Schools' Ordinance - or in simple language - the school law as this will be applied to future educational developments. The most crushing indictment that can be made about this impending piece of legislation is that the entire process of developing the legislation has been carried off with almost no public involvement. Notice please that there was minimal public participation, namely, brief meetings with the two elected School Boards of Yellowknife. (Does that impress you in Clyde River?) And, yes, after a degree of badgering, letters were sent, albeit belatedly, to certain organizations, etc. soliciting their contributions. Interestingly enough, the letters were sent long after the general guidelines were laid down so it is questionable with what degree of integrity the letters were distributed in the first place. Certainly, from  
26 an 'inside' point of view it was apparent that the

'nice guy' mentality ruled the day in the sense that it was felt that the development of the legislation could best be handled in an 'in-house' fashion à la the Survey of Education - 1972 vintage. In other words, the Department of Education establishment could perform their increasingly talented dancing act to the tunes supplied by the Executive with only a discordant note or two drummed-up by 'outsiders' - to carry this analogy to the extreme. Admittedly, this process is safe in the sense that it pretty well ensures that the forthcoming legislation will, indeed, attempt to be "all things to all people". However, unless you are just a "coffee-klatch" liberal, you, like I, may share some misgivings about this method of developing laws in a democracy. Moreover, you may have some concern as to the progressive quality of any legislation that evolves in this fashion. Would it not be at least conceivable that prior to developing anything at all, certain self-evident steps might be followed like: talking with people throughout the North to ascertain their views; spelling out a set of ideals in keeping with the often espoused philosophy of education in the N.W.T.; researching on an international basis legal developments as these affect education; even studying the relative merits of the English Common Law in contrast to American legislation procedures (put another way, maybe the N.W.T. does not need a voluminous document that tries to detail every potential situation but rather a simple, straight-forward espousal of general principles with 'the 'fine print' left to tradition, custom, convention and judicial interpretation)? One might go so far as to question the validity of the legislation itself in view of the fact that the legislative authority of the N.W.T. Government is anything but clear in educational matters, given the lack of attention that has been paid to such existing legislation as 'the Indian Act, Treaties Numbers 8 & 11. To use an old Ford Motor Company slogan a "better idea" might be to find out now if the N.W.T. Government is not taking on

provincial powers which are, in fact, out of its sphere of authority. However, legal investigations of this nature sometimes throw the 'cat into the pigeons'. Better to let the cats drowse (hopefully) otherwise there might be feathers fluttering - more likely flying.

But, you may say, surely if the points you are raising here have any validity then the Territorial Council, as representatives of the people, will accept or reject the legislation as they see fit - and isn't that how the democratic process must work?

If you want to assuage your misgivings about how things really are done by accepting the foregoing idea about the democratic process then anything that I may say can be regarded as being undemocratic, subversive, disloyal or whatever epithet comes to mind. So be it! Having attended numerous council sessions over the past five years I can only point out that M. P. Wally Firth understates the case when he mentions in the House of Commons that the N.W.T. is ruled autocratically. In reality, the situation is worse than what the word "autocracy" implies. In itself, autocracy can be a good thing under certain conditions and at certain times. However, when autocracy is combined with a cosmetic approach to the truth then any deep feelings you or I may harbour about the democratic process are likely to be shattered, to put things in the best possible light. It is not that government civil servants lie in an outright fashion to questions raised by council members. That, indeed, would be too blatant. Rather, the civil servants provide part answers, or oblique answers, or, on occasion no answers at all. Time after time I've observed astute council members get oh so close to the tip of the iceberg on a particularly sensitive issue, like hostels, or adult

miseducation, or the failing of young children, only to be fobbed off by a 'Watergate' quality response. I'm reasonably confident that the power structure of the N.W.T. Government regards plays like these as being smart - 'once again the peoples' representatives have been outfoxed and collectively we (civil servants) can all heave a sigh of relief.' It is because I've been witness to this process so often that I have the gravest doubts about the ability of the N.W.T. Council to make anything more than token gestures when it comes to examining a detailed piece of legislation such as the Schools' Ordinance. More than that however, is it within the wildest realm of democratic practice that legislation can and will be enacted with the vast majority of the population completely unaware of what is taking place? Is this the sort of game playing that is slowly but surely eroding the last vestiges of 'participating democracy' that a politician, who once had some ideals, enunciated?

However, questions of law and democracy are admittedly a little lofty in the sense that Joe Citizen seldom realizes what is taking place in any political realm until an issue hits him dead in the eye, so to speak. Therefore, perhaps a few realities about the cultural relevancy of our educational programs will strike somewhat closer to home. To confront this issue head-on, the realities of Northern education strongly suggest that with the aforementioned handful of exceptions in mind, over the past 5 years precious little progress has been made in the direction of relating Northern education to Northern kids. What has happened is that a couple of curriculum handbooks and about 100 different learning materials have been developed which, if the truth be known and accepted, have become the 'public relations' aspect of our educational system. The fact that seemingly everyone from the National Council of Teaching of English (U.S.A.) to the



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Canadian Home & School Federation to assorted University professors to native organizations - to teachers' organizations - to ordinary, everyday citizens have acclaimed these items as being in the vanguard of North American educational development is, of course, good news to the ears of the 'nice guys' and the 'politicians'. After all, 'just look at them - are we not progressive, culturally inclusive, and all the rest?' Okay, but what is actually happening in your classroom to your kids? Have you in fact made any attempt whatsoever to help that child develop pride and understanding of himself and then aided that child in his understanding of his fellow Northern - Canadian and World brothers and sisters? Or have you sloughed off your NATIVE problems into an 'exceptional class' where the behavior modifiers can wreak their havoc; or have you dispersed your problem NATIVES to a variety of other classrooms so that hopefully they'll get lost in the shuffle? What attempt have you made to get to know your public - the parents, or do you prefer to retreat to your comfy quarters at 3:45 in the hope that you won't have to look an Inuit or Indian in the eye and admit that the program you are running is designed to do one thing and one thing only - turn native children into third class citizens? Might I add that it isn't only the Inuit and Indian that are getting the short end of the educational stick. One does not live in a ghetto environment like Yellowknife (or Fort Smith or Hay River, or Inuvik, et al) for five years and not realize, feel, and see the incredible prejudicial learning experiences that are passed off as education in any number of classroom situations. To be very precise, and writing now as a father, I cannot and will not accept the fact that white children can proceed from grade level to grade level throughout the entire K-9 system without receiving any exposure to the Dogrib

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culture which virtually encircles the school environment. It is as clear as the rays of the sun beaming through my living room window as I write this that the school system knows little and cares less that the children of their school could benefit immensely by having the chance to learn from and about the Athapaskan and Inuit peoples who live in 'their backyards' - no pun intended. Is not cultural understanding a shared proposition and is it not at best probable that my children and hundreds like them could come to know, understand, and respect the customs, traditions, and heritage of the majority Northern population - the Indians and Inuit? Does not learning best begin with exposure to the immediate environment and then expand outward in increasing circles - like a tiny pebble dropped in a placid pond? To me, it is an affront to human dignity to provide educational programs for white children that give them no chance to know their non-native neighbours. (Oh yes, I've heard about the sporadic bus trips to Detah, and yes, isn't it just fine that Northern learning materials are found to be useful for the slow (meaning dumb) child, etc.) It is this type of prejudice (call it a sin of omission, if the term makes you feel better) that smacks of the sort of thing that smug white Canadians think only can happen in Mississippi or Alabama. Face up to it - very few teachers want to expose white kids to native peoples as these people live amongst us to-day. However, in so far as my own kids are concerned, the glaring omissions of the school program can be counteracted in our home. But there is another type of situation over which one really feels helpless - because one knows that case studies such as this one are legion in the history of Northern education. In this respect, if I live to be 100 I'll not forget 'Roger', an Indian kid that made it to about grade 6 in the local school before the

system made his life impossible and now he's gone. Presumably, the educational authorities are relieved because 'Roger' was indeed a problem - an Indian in a school that is geared almost exclusively to one child - the white-middle class son or daughter of the mandarin class.

All of this is harsh and deliberately so because frankly, I am sick in the depths of my soul at the wastage of human resources that is going on around me. I don't think it is good enough to say, 'Oh, come on, we're doing alright'; nor do I think it is good enough to say that 'You're asking too much, we (teachers, etc.) need time'. No, these answers aren't satisfactory because again the 'nice guy mentality' is gradually colouring everything and frustrating every real attempt to make fundamental changes. Does the educational system ever fire a teacher who is known to be prejudiced against native people? No! Does the system ever fire an incompetent administrator? No - more likely than not a promotion, or at least a transfer, is forthcoming because this 'marshmallow' approach to decision-making forestalls public criticism - at least for a time. Does the system attempt to employ administrators that have the necessary qualifications and philosophical foundations that would enable them to become educational leaders? The answer is a qualified "No". Just out of interest, throughout the Department of Education as a whole, through to the Regional Offices and thence to the principalship, there is a distinct minority of administrators who are qualified, by any stretch of the imagination, to hold their present position. Now and again a "bright light or two" does make it to the administrative post but it is an accurate generalization to say that in the past 5 years most positions have been

filled in typical political pork-barrel fashion - 'you have to find jobs for your friends' and in one particularly Northern Region, 'you pick people you can trust' - meaning boat-rockers are verboten. Needless to say that particular region is the worst in the entire N.W.T., not because there aren't a few good people who are trying very hard to do well by the kids and their parents, but because, at the Regional level beginning with the Regional Director and running down through the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents' office, the word is "don't do anything - keep the lid on!" Well, the story becomes repetitive and boring so I'll drop it. What's the use? To the outsider, the Department of Education will continue to smile and give you the "hail fellow - well met" treatment. New bureaucratic slots are being created, fewer and fewer decisions are made outside of the Assistant or Deputy Commissioners offices and the charade will continue. (If a note of levity may be injected, one of the classic funny scenes that is enacted almost daily at 'Headquarters' is to see little men with big file folders scrambling to the 6th floor to find out - what they (educators) are supposed to do now!)

Eventually, every house of cards is bound to fall. For those of us inside the system we can pack up and move along. But for the kids and people of the N.W.T. one can only hope and pray that their fortitude and strength of character will see them through. Maybe one day, human decency, honesty and brotherhood will prevail. Such idealism is quickly vanishing, but, like a drowning man, you have to clutch at one last straw. In the final analysis, "Leo Durocher" may well be wrong!

Paul Robinson