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An open letter to the Director of Education

Dear Mr. Macpherson

I have been attempting during recent weeks to assemble my

own opinion on education in the N.W.T. using every source I could find. I realize that what I have so far gathered is sub-

stantially a matter of opinion of others and my own personal interpretation of answers obtained from others. In no way can my investigation be considered to have been conducted in a scientific manner, though I have attempted throughout to be honest and accurate. However I believe that it may be useful to you and to others to have from me a progress report on my studies to date.

I have spent almost no time in a classroom during instruction in recent months. I reject the premise that this is likely to show in any worthwhile way what happens in school. Both teacher and students are likely to be on their best behaviour and it futile to think you can expect the average visitor to obtain a representative impression from any such artificial staging of the educational process.

Instead I have gone out of my way to ask searching questions of teachers and students, and have used my own personal observation of anything relevant to the education scene I could find.

I have lived in the North for 11 years, during most of which I have not been close to education. From earliest times since my arrival in the territories I have been impressed by the willingness of the Government of Canada to spend money on education in the territories. Equally, since my arrival I have never failed to be amazed by the apparent lack of graduates from the educational system who have achieved any measure of success either by the standards of white southern society or of native society.

When I first came North there used to be a philosophy that education of itself was good. An Eskimo who could read Shakespeare in his snowhouse would be a richer, better, because more educated person was the thinking, so I was told.

In practice, I have observed that many graduates of our schools are far less well equipped for life in our middle class wage economy or on the land than those who have had no formal education. There is a record of stability and regularity of employment among older and un-schooled Eskimo people in Frobisher Bay which is excellent. I attribute this to the discipline imposed during upbringing by the rigour of life on the land.

I attribute our failure to assimilate younger people into our economy to the lack of discipline in all aspects of our society including education, welfare, government, the

and the general public. The ancient Roman saying "a healthy mind is a healthy body" seems to have passed by teachers and students in the N.W.T.

I am appalled by the lack of preparation of children for school. A child going into grade one unable to speak English is immediately at least two years behind, forever, in his education.

I do not believe that we have machinery to bring on any normal student disadvantaged in this way so that he or she can attain university entrance at university age.

If we do not have the capability to educate to university entrance level any who wish to go to university (or other higher education) then we are not making available to students the freedom of choice which it is, I understand, our policy to give. We do not offer equality of opportunity to northern students. Nor can we honestly say that we offer life on the land as an alternative. Whether you look at life on the land in Frobisher Bay, Lac La Martre, Tuktoyaktuk or wherever, anything remotely resembling "the ancient cultural way of life" has all but ceased to exist. There is in my mind considerable doubt whether it ever did exist in anything remotely resembling the ideal which is represented as having been lost.

I do not agree that learning a native language in the home is anything but the most serious handicap for children if it is not accompanied from age 3 or 4 by instruction in English.

I do not believe that our native languages exist in pure or useful form anywhere in the North except in some isolated Eskimo settlements. I do agree that there may be some validity to the concept of learning a language from a language as is done in say Switzerland. You are mistaken, however, in thinking that our native languages provide a base from which other languages can be learned. There are no useful grammars and dictionaries. There are no people capable of carrying out instruction in grammar, syntax and vocabulary to and from the native language; and English. And much native languages has deteriorated to a formless patois.

There is no future for native languages in our educational system or in making a living afterwards. If people want to keep native languages, they will be preserved as is Romanche in South Tirol and Engadin, where the entire population is tri-lingual and speak Romanche only as a family language, as they have

from educators to parents and students. It seems that we have had a political game of giving students, and especially Indian students, what they want rather than what they need. Many native parents don't have the faintest idea what their children need to prepare them for life afterwards and are not in a position to determine whether they are getting what they need.

We have an apparent policy of taking away children from homes where our education is foreign. We then give instruction in our version of their old way of life, preparing them for a past and a culture which has long ago perished. The present culture of alcohol and unemployment which exists in many families is seen by many students as being caused by their inability to survive in our society. There is a defence mechanism set off which looks backwards, downwards, sideways—anyway except to the future. Why do you keep looking back? Why don't you educate all northerners for the future?

You say that education must be relevant to the environment and must attempt to meet the needs of all the people it is designed to serve. I don't believe you have the faintest idea what our students, especially native students, require to make a living either in the wage economy or off the land. You say that it is futile to transplant North a system of education designed for southern Canadian people when value system and lifestyle is vastly different to (from) that of children living in Fort Franklin or Clyde River.

However, while you say this I can almost hear Panarctic going into Clyde River and Canadian Arctic Gas going into Fort Franklin and looking for what?—An educated, industrious labor force. But all they find is people trained for nothing who can't even speak the language very well. If they hire at all, it is tokenism.

This is the racial segregation Paul Robinson ought to be bellyaching about instead of lamenting that we are insufficiently native oriented in Yellowknife.

The trouble with Paul Robinson's philosophy and that of many idealists is that they have never lived in a native environment, let alone done business with native people on a basis of mutual need and respect. Maybe your next Chief of Curriculum should teach a tough community for a year before starting on Curriculum.

I believe you are wrong in

Churches and various do-gooder individuals and agencies. I agree that this is a problem of society, not related to education alone.

The earliest strong memory which I have directly of a school situation is of the school run by Mr. and Mrs. Davies in Pond Inlet. I have never felt a better atmosphere at any time in any school than I did here. I attribute this to the strongest possible discipline with which the school appeared to be run. Mrs. Davies had been running pre-school classes with a view to preparing children for school and especially for instruction in the English language. I have the impression that this was so successful that children could start grade one with very little of a language handicap for getting through the grade one course. I was also impressed by the attention paid to regimented physical training which students appeared to love and I was impressed by the remarkable degree of cleanliness and health, especially the absence of festered running noses so often seen around the North.

By contrast, I am constantly appalled by the lack of physical fitness and of physical education which I see everywhere in the North among students, teachers

done for 2,000 years.

Your policies are making linguistic cripples out of many native people and there is no recovery from this disability for most of them.

I am told that at a recent meeting in Snowdrift between parents and the Yellowknife superintendent of education the parents asked for a kindergarten. They want their children to learn English so that they start grade one with a chance to participate in the educational system of Canada. They say that teaching the native language is their job. Teaching English is your job. I have similar feedback from all over the North and am delighted with this progressive attitude.

Conversely, I am told that white students in Inuvik are not permitted to take courses in Eskimo or Loucheux.

Everywhere I go in the territories I am finding that education is leading society in permissiveness, rather than the other way around. I do not believe that responsible parents of the territories have molded the educational process to what they want. Though I do find disturbing evidence that there may be a policy to pass on responsibility

suggesting that we have a common puritanical background which suggests to most of us that work must be distasteful and that play must be a complete waste of time. I can't think of any puritans in all history whose thinking could be reduced to this simplification.

John Milton, one of the greatest puritans and also one of the greatest writers of all time, wrote that he could not praise a cloistered virtue. Of course there's fun and there's work and the two can and should overlap. But I hear of one school where it is said that they watch movies almost every afternoon, often the same movies shown over more than once, especially if the subject is something inflammatory like how the white man destroyed the buffalo. I hear of afternoon after afternoon devoted to playing bingo and monopoly.

I am told that in Inuvik there is a policy for Social Development to take students from bad homes and put them in hostels so they can pay attention to their education in a suitable environment. This is good. But I am told that in Fort Simpson the authorities refuse to take local

(continued next page)

page 13

-OPEN LETTER TO MACPHERSON-

(from page 13)

students out of their homes during the school year and put them in hostels even if the parents request it. Is the family environment of alcohol and violence more sacred than education?

I have been told by the retiring administration of Stinger Hall, Dr. Holman, and by several long-term residents of Inuvik, that we are doing a less good job of educating students today than we were doing ten years ago. Mr. Holman is very sad and bitter about the degeneration of discipline in the Inuvik schools. I am told that 10 years ago Inuvik was graduating would be doctors, engineers pilots etc. Today students are being counselled to become nurses aides, rather than R.N.s or doctors, to become teachers aides rather than teachers, to become secretaries rather than executives.

One teacher tells me of discipline in Inuvik as it was for some years. If he had to break up a fight in the school yard, the student would reply "All right, take me to see Freddy and we'll talk about it over juice and cookies." This teacher would never send a student to see the principal for whom students had so little respect.

You say that your department reflects social change. But I will give you two examples of the department's failure to respond, examples dating from before your time. I refer to one superintendent of education who was finally given a transfer to a principal's position after years and years of outcry from public and teachers. I refer also to the transfer of a principal from one of the major schools in the territories after similar pressure and frustration. There are numerous examples of people in your department who are no use

to you or the people of the territories. Paul Robinson is right about that, though I give you credit for making some long overdue transfers, which he doesn't.

I have found that there are nearly 500 students supposed to be in school in Fort Simpson in grades 1-9. I would expect there to be about 150 students from the Fort Simpson school in grades 10-12 in Yellowknife. Instead, I am given a figure of less than 25.

I am told and I understand from my own observation that education in Yellowknife is in general very good and that it is comparable with what is available in Southern Canada. But look at the huge area of supply for students and see what a low percentage even get to grade 10, let alone graduate.

I am told that absenteeism from the school in Fort Simpson runs extraordinarily high. I am told that in senior grades it runs to 50 percent on occasion.

I am told that it is normal in Fort Simpson to have a disparity equivalent to five grades among similar aged students all in the same class. I am told that "levelling" to this extent makes a mockery of giving fair attention at all levels of advancement (or retardation). I am absolutely against levelling as carried out to extremes in the territories, though one principal tells me you would introduce streaming over his dead body. I would prefer to see sensible streaming introduced again and I don't mind seeing the odd principal's dead body if necessary if he's so inflexible.

I understand that the Superintendent of Education in Fort Simpson is of the new liberal persuasion. In consequence there is a high turnover rate this year among teachers as most of the disciplinarians are moving out, including the phys ed teacher who is being let go.

One teacher who is leaving Fort Simpson says that the new

liberal ways may work when the system settles down. But why shake it up so badly just for the hell of it all at once?

If students knew so much about what was good for their education, then we wouldn't need teachers. I believe you are wrong in saying that schools are where students should learn to learn. They must be taught to learn. Teachers cannot abdicate their responsibility to teach or you have anarchy. And you do have anarchy in some of your smaller schools.

One Yellowknife teacher who has taught in smaller communities speaks well of education in Yellowknife. But he says you couldn't have kept him and his family in the North anywhere else, because the schools don't measure up.

I know one settlement where the two white families with children in grade one both have their children out of school doing Ontario correspondence courses. One family is there by virtue of employment of the territorial government. The other family was advised by a visiting member of your department to take their child out of school.

I know of one settlement where the former native settlement manager left because he reckoned that his kids lost an entire year of school while they were in that settlement.

I understand that for all the time that there has been education in the Keewatin there are only two native tradesmen in the region, one carpenter and one electrician. I am told that very few other positions of responsibility have been filled by native people of the region.

I understand that the percentage of graduates from Inuvik who go on to further education has dropped during the last 10 years from around 90 per cent to

around 15 percent

I understand that Sir John Franklin School in Yellowknife does not keep records of what happens to the school's former students. Wouldn't this be one way to foster pride in the establishment and find out whether the school is doing the job it sets out to do?

I agree with you that we in the N.W.T. have not found "the answer." But I suggest that there was a tremendous lot of good starting to be done by the schools run by the missionaries in the territories.

We have substantially thrown all of this out and replaced it with in many places anarchy.

This is not to say that even now we don't have our successes. And we still have a large majority of excellent teachers. But many of them are being driven out by the current excess of permissiveness. It's very sad to see such men as Mr. Holman being driven out because he's tired of students telling him to go screw himself and sees no prospect for improvement.

It sounds like good politics to "assist" students, help them to learn and so forth.

But we owe to our students and to society more than that. We owe our students, as we do our own children, a framework of discipline so that they can develop self-discipline, personal freedom and independence, and the means to personal and economic satisfaction.

I must say that there is plenty of evidence that you and your department are looking for answers, and a little evidence that you are finding some answers.

Maybe there is a lot of sense in the observation of territorial councillor Bryan Pearson that we should first educate parents before we educate children.

Sincerely
Colin Alexander,
Publisher,
News of the North