

## Are Private Schools and Catholic Education Really the Enemies of the State?

By John Hilton O'Brien, 28 May 2023

Since its founding, Canada has been a beacon of religious and ethnic tolerance. That tolerance was expressed primarily in educational rights: the British North America Act guaranteed Canada's (primarily French) Roman Catholic minority the right to have their own schools. Alberta has expanded on this: 70% of instructional funding is allocated to "private" schools, which may include schools for other minorities. Charter schools are also available for those wanting to experiment with new educational focusses. Rather than privileging one minority group, Alberta's educational pluralism has allowed it to accommodate all. In the current Provincial election, this has changed. One of the primary parties involved stands to upset the Canadian and Albertan tradition of tolerance. The policies revolving around the New Democratic Party's education platform are so radical as to represent a return to the nativism of the pre-Canadian colonial era. It's a new radicalism reminiscent of the 19th century – precisely because the needs of the activists are so similar. It isn't just about hate for the "other" – by using the power of the state to crush minority interests, the radicals can gain power for themselves. Part of the strategy seems to be misinformation. The NDP educational platform is a case in point. It criticizes the United Conservatives record, claiming that enrollment has grown by 36,000 students since 2018, with the government not hiring any additional teachers. The criticism cherry-picks the data: from 2019 to 2021, enrollment actually dropped in public schools. What is more, the provincial government should not be

hiring teachers: that is a decision best made by the local school boards which actually employ them. The NDP's platform beyond this consists only of claiming that they will hire teachers and teachers' aides, and will build and modernize schools. The sound of what isn't said is louder than what is said. There is no plan to maintain funding for Alberta's private and Charter schools. In fact, during a press conference, NDP leader Rachel Notley said that "when we were in government before, we maintained . . . funding to charters and to private schools. But today's announcement and my priority going forwards is to . . . make up for the multiple attacks on the quality of public education . . . so that more and more families just choose to be part of our public education system." The "but" is deafening: in the past, the NDP funded Charter and private schools: but now they won't. It sounds very much as if the NDP plan to defund private and Charter schools – including Christian schools, Jewish Schools, Islamic schools, and Sikh schools. Tolerance and educational pluralism are a thing of the past. It may be that the NDP does not plan to do this, of course. After all, they didn't actually say the word "defund." But the fact that they are careful not to say they will fund such schools makes it reasonable for disinterested observers to think that there may be a hidden agenda. The company that the NDP keeps, however, make this the least secret agenda in politics. The NDP's company starts with the Alberta Teachers' Association, which has been running a noisy advertising campaign. The kicker to that campaign has been a question under "create a more equitable

education system," to ask candidates "Would your party transfer current private-school funding to support programs for students in poverty?" Since we first pointed out this question's existence, it has vanished from the questionnaire for candidates on the Stand for Education Site: fortunately, the original questionnaire was also on page 34 of their "Five Solutions" booklet. The NDP's candidates must also give one pause. As President of the Public School Boards Association of Alberta (PSBAA), Cathy Hogg spearheaded a campaign to eliminate Catholic education – along with every other sort of education that isn't a public school. Hogg has never claimed it as a mistake. Notley has never disavowed it. The NDP is, simply, comfortable having a candidate who has actively, from a position of power, attacked the constitutional rights of a minority. While Notley was careful to tell her presser that she would fund Catholic schools, her comfort with Hogg leaves one with the impression that she may find a way to defund them in fact, if not in name. Nor is Hogg alone. Edmonton candidate Nathan Ip has advocated for elimination of the Catholic system. The Edmonton Journal paraphrased him as saying that Albertans should have a conversation about whether it's "fair and just" that one branch of Christianity should have a publicly funded school system when other religions do not. The fact that the NDP appears to be poised to cut funding for the private schools by which other religions are able to fund their schools does not seem to register. The NDP have not backed away from any of these candidates, or corrected

their statements. In fact, if the tone of Twitter conversations about Catholic schools are to be believed, they are supported by many of their followers. The reason for this apparent surge in nativism may be partly explained by financial self-interest. After all, private school teachers are not ATA members: the ATA stands to gain millions of dollars per year in dues if those schools are closed. Similarly, the Public School Boards' Association's campaign amounts to a demand that the government close any competitors, and give them all the money. The naked self-interest on display is nauseating. However, it is probable that there is a political undercurrent. It would not be the first time that Catholic institutions were attacked because they might not support someone's agenda. Bismarck's kulturkampf, which eliminated Catholic education in Germany, came from his fear that Catholics might not support the King. The Third Republic's Ferry Laws, which made it illegal for Catholics to have their own schools in France (and exiled religious orders to

Canada) was done because they feared Catholics might not support the Republic. New times, new kings. A group of Mount Royal University professors recently published an opinion piece in the left-wing online magazine "The Conversation," claiming that "how Alberta votes on May 29 will either pave the way for 2SLGBTQ youth to be affirmed in their identities, or it will create a formal pathway from homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in the province." They argue that parental rights are "a dog whistle for discrimination against 2SLGBTQ+ youth around the world." Their solution is an NDP government – specifically in order to force teachers to keep secrets from parents. According to the activist professors, the rights of children and youth are opposed to their parents. Christian (especially Catholic) education stands on a well-developed corpus of thought about human nature, and is apt to point out that this is a false dichotomy. They further point out that the lives of children are not improved

by pitting them against their parents. The activists' response to this is the NDP platform – with its strategic silences. The parallel with the colonial powers is striking. Once again, the radicals seek to gain power and prestige. Once again, they fear that any form of education not under their control will not support their rise in power. The response is simple: if private or Catholic schools insist on respecting a religious tradition – or simply on the idea that there is a single, objective truth – then they must go. Like the nativists of colonial days, the activists, public school board association, and activist professors seek power for themselves by declaring their opponents to be enemies of the state. Their ambition is currently embodied in the NDP's educational platform – and we had all better hope that the never have a chance to implement it.

***John Hilton-O'Brien is the Executive Director of Parents for Choice in Education, [www.parentchoice.ca](http://www.parentchoice.ca)***