

# Ontario families deserve better than their so-called education system

by Conrad Black



Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce

**Teachers have to stop** swaddling their avarice and negligence in a fog of pious claptrap about putting the interests of the schoolchildren first

The renewed agitation by teachers in Ontario highlights the debacle of the whole public teaching and school administration apparatus that is possibly the greatest and most universal public policy failing in modern Western civilization. It is one of the richest and most distressing ironies of our times

that all of our Western societies consecrate more and more funding resources to education to produce steadily less educated and ostensibly less informed and less usefully intelligent graduates of secondary schools and graduate university programs. Not surprisingly, we are also focusing on fewer and fewer real subjects of authentic study. As my learned and much-harassed friend Jordan Peterson has often said, any course calling itself something that ends with the word "studies" is not a real subject. It is just a part of a larger subject and generally implies the exclusion of most of the real subject (and I write this as a former lecturer at McGill University in "French Canada Studies," which was in fact the history of Quebec).

Illustrative of the endless and debilitating problem of the public education system in Ontario is the announcement on Wednesday of a one-day strike planned for Monday Jan. 20 of the public elementary school teachers in the Toronto and Ottawa areas. (Similar one-day rotating strikes have already closed public secondary schools across the province; Monday's threatened strike would be the first to directly close elementary schools.) The announcement of the planned stoppage was accompanied by the breezy announcement by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO): "Please know this decision was made with student safety as our first priority." Hapless parents of the locked-out children may want to reflect on the implications of the fact that the teachers to whom their children are entrusted feel that the best guaranty of the schoolchildren's safety lies in closing them out of their schools. The response of the Ontario Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce, seems to me very appropriate: the province will compensate affected parents with cash allocation for daycare services on strikebound days. Since, as far as I can deduce, the pupils don't learn any more at their schools than they would at daycare centres, the schoolchildren are no worse off and the province will economize as long as the striking school personnel are not paid for the days they take off.

ETF0 spokespeople said rotating strikes would continue until the provincial government "gets serious" about settling, i.e. caving in to their demands. It reminds me of the main Montreal school commission strike in 1967. The premier of Quebec, Daniel Johnson (Sr.), enacted an order-in-council requiring an immediate return to work of all teachers, and the order provided that failure to report to work of at least 90 per cent of the teachers involved would result in the officers of the union being taken into custody, the seizure of the union's assets and the decertification of the union as bargaining agent for the teachers. Any non-compliant teacher without a professional affidavit of a sufficient medical or family emergency excuse for non-compliance would be dismissed for cause and declared ineligible for receipt of any category of benefit from the province for an indefinite period. When asked at his press conference how the government would teach the students if there was not compliance with the order despite its draconian penalties, Johnson po-facedly replied that an armed officer of the Quebec Provincial Police would be placed in each classroom with a closed-circuit television screen, the minister of education and senior colleagues in his department would give the lessons by this method of transmission and \$20 million a week would be rebated to Quebec taxpayers while non-unionized schoolteachers were recruited to return to work on terms acceptable to the government. He could not have been entirely serious and the strike ended abruptly anyway, but Johnson was on the right track. Teachers have to stop masquerading as a learned profession while behaving like an irresponsible industrial trade union, and they have to stop swaddling their avarice and negligence in a fog of pious claptrap about putting the interests of the schoolchildren first.

It is a completely impossible student-teacher relationship that reduces pedagogy to rotating strikes amidst unctuous pieties about the welfare of the student-hostages and the outright blackmail of the parents, especially where the

parents work on weekdays. That is why the minister's daycare substitute at least has the makings of a counter-strategy. But if the larger societal problem of declining teaching standards and steadily less proficient graduates of these schools is to be reversed, the entire structure based on the agitation of unionized personnel in top-heavy education administration units has to be overturned. The teachers' unions should be decertified and pay should be recalibrated on the basis of meritocratic results, with adjustments for more sociologically challenging areas. Two years ago when provincial testing revealed declining test results for successive graduating years, the reaction of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation was to recommend the abandonment of the comparative testing.

This entire mentality of uniform regimented work rules and compensation levels unconnected to anything except seniority has to be scrapped. There is no surer way than continuation of the status quo to produce teachers who uphold George Bernard Shaw's famous assertion that "He who can does; he who can't teaches." We all remember the good teachers we had, but mainly we remember silly and ineffective or excessively authoritarian teachers. They have undoubtedly declined in competence at least in the public system, and from what I see, I wouldn't bet the ranch on the proposition that the Catholic system is superior – the pontifications of their teachers' union leader, Liz Stuart, are just as belligerent and philistine as those of her secular analogues. The public schools have suffered work stoppages and work-to-rule activity intermittently for the past eight years; the Catholic system has been somewhat less perturbed.

The quality of teachers has undoubtedly suffered from what was in all other respects a great step forward for society – the vast improvement of the status of women in professional and executive roles that has drained the teacher pool of a large number of its best practitioners. The teachers should be a

learned profession, like university faculty-members, lawyers, doctors, architects, engineers, and properly qualified clergy. For this to be affordable to society, we will have to make educational administration less self-perpetuating, and less costly, accept larger classes for more apt students, improve curriculum and stop using the occupation of study of commercially unviable fields as a disguised device for reduction of unemployment by paying stupefying amounts of public money to subsidize underworked faculty imparting politically correct non-academic subjects which are unrelated to a graduate's ability to be a self-supporting economic participant in society. The more essential crafts, such as plumbing and the more exacting areas of construction and mechanics, should be socio-economically upgraded.

As a society, we must snap out of the class snobbery of the Second World War era in which we have disdained blue-collar work that in fact adds value, in favour of pseudo-academic work that does not, including the frills of academia and the bloated greed of the 360-degree cartel of the legal profession. This entire complex of issues must be addressed, but it all begins by doing a better job of teaching children. Among other benefits, a better educated population will demand a more elevated and reliable service from the media than the comprehensive failure to inform with integrity and thoroughness that afflicts Canada now. A better teacher corps will produce better educated young people, a more informed and sophisticated population and ultimately higher quality media and more imaginative and successful political leadership. Canada is in danger of becoming fundamentally uncompetitive, a condition that it will not be possible to conceal by mesmerizing the electorate with a lot of nonsense about climate change and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

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