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OttawaWatch 138: About faith-based schools

By Lloyd Mackey

John Tory, the dominant subject of this piece, did not win the Ontario premiership. The record will show that his opponent, incumbent Liberal premier Dalton McGuinty, took communicative advantage of Tory's tin ear.

But, today, Tory is mayor of Canada's largest city, Toronto, and has built a solid leadership record after the rather Trumpian and sometimes tragic tenure of his predecessor, the late Rob Ford. (Ironically, Rob Ford's brother, Doug, is current premier of Ontario. And, while their styles differ, Ford and Tory manage to get along fairly well and also to speak a conservative perspective somewhat eloquently, in a federal world currently dominated by the Justin Trudeau Liberals.

The Ontario provincial election set for October 10, has become the focal point for a voter discussion about government support for non-Catholic faith-based schools.

And the victim in the discussion appears to be Conservative leader John Tory, despite the fact that polls consistently suggest that voters think he would make a better premier than the incumbent, Dalton McGuinty.

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We will return to that discussion in a moment, after reflecting a bit further on Brian Mulroney's *Memoirs*, touched on in last week's *OttawaWatch*.

Readers will recall that I noted, then, that Mulroney glossed over or entirely avoided faith-based family and life social issues, in his new book covering that part of his life lived from 1939 to 1993.

As I get a little further into the 1,100 plus pages, there are some references that suggest Mulroney was not entirely devoid of conscience in letting his faith help shape his ideas about social action and justice.

That faith was shaped, to some extent at least, in Mulroney's Catholic education, first, at St. Thomas College and later, at St. Francis Xavier University, both in Atlantic Canada.

There is a short passage in *Memoirs* in which Mulroney talks about Moses Coady, the priest who was a co-founder of St. FX's Coady International Institute, and his particular approach to Christian action back when CII was founded 80 years ago.

Coady Institute engages in world development education that will enable its graduates to work in non government relief and development agencies.

That mention rang a bell with me because my brother, Barry Mackey, who has spent a fair amount of his adult life in microcredit and other faith-based development work, mostly on the Indian sub-continent of Asia, took work at Coady in preparation for that activity.

Intriguingly, Mulroney, the former prime minister accepts that he, himself, has been sometimes criticized for emphasizing the adjective more than the noun – in other words, being more “progressive” than “conservative”. And he speaks of the Coady influence in the following paragraphs on page 33-34:

St. FX was clearly left wing in its political orientation, an unsurprising fact given its roots. Dr. Moses Coady, founder of the Antigonish Movement, was largely responsible for this, although his philosophy was essentially non-political; rather, it was based squarely on the moral obligation we all had to assist the poor, here and abroad, and on his steely resolve that something practical be done to implement the vision.

The Antigonish Movement grew out of a social philosophy based on adult education and the co-operative movement, which held the view that by working together selflessly, better and more prosperous lives could be achieved for all.

... That influence stayed with me ...

... The government I led placed Dr. Coady and his principles at the forefront of government policy and decision-making, from our quick response to the famine crisis in Ethiopia, to the forgiveness of African debt, to the fight against apartheid and so much more.

There is more, of course, including some of the “smashing” women he met at and around St. FX, before Mila became the love of his life.

But his reference to this Catholic university being “clearly left wing” is, from this perspective, a bit of an over reach, as with his more “progressive” than “conservative” apologetic.

It is probably more than a truism to suggest that the gospel, whether in its Catholic or Protestant cloak, tends to move the whole of political discussion toward the right – at least in terms of the linking of personal initiative with co-operative effort.

Mulroney’s comments belie the continuing tension between those who want faith-based education to be important to the shaping of society and those who prefer a purge of such influences.

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That brings us back to the current Ontario situation, where John Tory has been promising to break the province out of a system where public funding goes only to secular and Catholic “public” schools. In so doing, it bypasses Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and other such faith-based elementary and secondary institutions.

Intriguingly, the mid-campaign polls show about three-quarters of Ontario voters being opposed to such funding. It appears that if Tory does not budge on this, it could cost him a shot at the Ontario premiership.

Ironically, his opponent is the present premier, whose family and he were educated in the publicly-supported Catholic system in which his wife, Terri, is presently teaching.

As a non-Ontarian who has lived in the province for only fourteen years of adulthood, I find support for faith-based schools of all types to be a no-brainer. It is already the situation in one form or another in six other provinces. In the remainder, the official stance is to be equally non-forthcoming to any faith-based schools.

There is so often a social dichotomy on this issue. Some supporters of faith-based schools would wish for no support because they believe that it always comes with the price of secular state control in the teaching of values. And others point to the United Nations, of all groups, as suggesting that Ontario violates the UN human rights code by supporting some faith-based schools and not others.

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The question, at the moment, will be whether Tory can extricate himself, in a principled way, from what he has promised to the Ontario voters.

Do not be surprised if that extrication comes in the form of something that says he recognizes that Ontarians are not yet ready to talk about fairness in school funding.

In so doing, he could draw on the kinds of things being done successfully in various countries, to develop a fairly comprehensive program of comparative religion education in public school settings.

Granted, the introduction of comparative religion programs carries with it the possibility of building momentum for eliminating of public support for specifically-Catholic schools. But that is all part of adapting 140-year-old constitutional issues to the contemporary community, which tries to balance faith values, human rights and a civil society in a way that will get more complex before it grows easier.

In some ways, the arguments in favor of a comparative religions approach line up with those relating to renewal of the health care system, bringing the best practices of various nations to the principled blending of private and public health care funding. The difference is that health care – at least in the federal sector – comes under the Canada Health Act. Public support of education is pretty much a provincial and municipal thing.

After October 10, things will undoubtedly be a little clearer, much to the disappointment of one group or another.

Until then, I hope there will be opportunity for Ontario voters to think through the best way of handling this “no brainer.”

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