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## **OttawaWatch 143: Faith-based collegiality**

**By Lloyd Mackey**

*John and Christine's daughter is now 13 and Christine continues to practice dentistry in Edmonton.*

Today's *OttawaWatch* is an update about Edmonton-St. Albert MP John Williams, his wife, Christine Botchway and their now-10-month-old daughter Vienna Fitzgerald Williams. And there is an additional update on the Ontario faith-based schools issue at the end of the piece.

Both items could well fall under the topic of "collegiality", in their own separate ways.

I first wrote about Williams and Botchway on January 9, a few weeks after Botchway gave birth. It was a warm story: a member of parliament losing his wife to cancer several years ago and meeting his new spouse a few years later, through the parliamentary prayer breakfast.

Williams has already announced that he will not be running for re-election. Whenever that non-event takes place for him, he and Botchway are already preparing together for the next step.

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Botchway, as readers might recall, is Ghanaian in background, although she grew up in Toronto. She practices dentistry in Edmonton, with a working schedule she has cut to three days a week to accommodate motherhood and her other strong interest: building support for a school and community assistance for HIV/AIDS orphans in Rwanda.

When I wrote about them in January, I reported that Williams:

... wanted to pursue his own international interests in tandem with his new wife's. He had earlier become interested in "combating the international corruption pandemic" – as one headline sensationally phrased it – through the creating of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC).

What new fatherhood and motherhood will do to the international anti-corruption and development interests of the Williams-Botchway combo, is anyone's guess. But with her youthful vigor, his cerebral experience – and the grace of God – they will undoubtedly continue to wage effective war against their respectively challenging pandemics.

Next fall, all three of them will spend several weeks in Africa, first in Morocco , where Williams will be attending a GOPAC conference, and then in Rwanda.

Meanwhile, he is using his accounting background to help set up a registered charity through which Botchway can attract donations for developing the Rwanda school project.

To Williams, marriage to Botchway has given him a whole new perspective on his Presbyterian understanding of the way in which God reaches out to people. His interest in anti-corruption activity is an outgrowth of his education and experience in macroeconomics.

But Botchway, he says, raises awareness about how HIV/AIDS has created a need to rebuild the lives of children left orphans by a massive pandemic. Before this project came along, she was already working with a concept called “Women Influencing Nations.” But many of the women – the mothers and grandmothers in these Rwandan villages – were telling her not to worry about them, but to see that their children were cared for.

And John and Christine see taking young Vienna along on the trip as a natural educational experience for her, in gaining some youthful sense of those things about Africa that have captured her parents’ attention.

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Williams, incidentally, wants his wife to tell me the whole story of her interest in Rwanda, rather than his trying to do it himself, because that story itself is deeply embedded in her psyche and she, in his view, can tell it with real meaning.

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One more update, on a different subject; my September 18 comments about faith-based schools. That, readers will recall, was the ad infinitum focal point of the recent Ontario provincial election.

My suggestion, at the time, was that it would cost John Tory his shot at the premiership of Ontario.

He did pull back on his proposals, but that turned out to be too little, too late.

But it does not remove the need for bringing our communities into the 21<sup>st</sup> century on this issue, or at least, out of the 19<sup>th</sup>.

Ontario, unlike several other provinces, is hung up on the fact that state support for Catholic schools was, in effect, a constitutional condition. The public school system, under some of the then-considered-progressive innovations of a famous Methodist lay leader, Egerton Ryerson, was supposed to be for the rest of us – the Protestants. Schools

for Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and other groups were, for the most part, still in the future landscape.

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But the future, of course, is here.

And a piece in the September 29 issue of the *National Post* provides a clue or two about how church and state might co-operate, rather than being at loggerheads, if only we can catch up on the changes the passages of time have wrought.

The story is about Eden High school, which writer James Cowan points out “for two decades has offered chapel services and Bible classes for its Mennonite students.”

At one time this school was known as Eden Christian College. It was owned and operated by an Mennonite-based school board.

In 1988, it joined the public system, during the Liberal government of David Peterson. At the time, five current Dalton McGuinty cabinet members, including Finance Minister Greg Sorbara, were part of Peterson’s administration.

All of which is relevant to putting a few coffin nails into the McGuinty argument against funding religious schools.

But Eden was a specific case. Faced with dwindling enrolment and mounting costs, the school negotiated to join the Lincoln County education board. That meant students no longer needed to pay tuition, which could run to \$2,800 a year. But they could still attend chapel services and Bible study classes.

While Eden High teaches provincial curriculum and has teachers hired for the most part by the public school board, it is different because of its “spiritual life department”, with teachers hired by a separate advisory board which includes representatives from the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren.

Co-ordinated by that department, the school’s spiritual programming includes prayer teams and a fall retreat, as well as the daily chapel services and Bible courses.

Linda Kartasinski, Eden High’s superintendent told the *National Post* that private donations, not public funds, finance the spiritual life department.

Eden has an enrolment of 780 students and shares its home with Lakeport Secondary, a traditionally-secular high school.

While she allows that accommodating the two schools on one campus can have its problems, “I don’t think it hasn’t had any major issues we haven’t been able to deal with quite collegially,” she suggests.

The word “collegially” carries a fair amount of hope with it, in terms of Ontario being able to work its way, ultimately, to a fair and equitable school system. Such a system would accommodate, not only Protestants and Catholics, but any increasing numbers of students from other faith groups that demographic change is likely to bring.

Indeed, collegiality and collaboration are two of the watchwords that can be continuously drawn back into this issue. For now, it might be helpful to keep the faith-based school question out of the fire of politicians. Let them sit and listen, while parents, religious leaders and educators talk together, then see what emerges.

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