

John Tory: well beyond the bland

Is the Conservative Leader's plan for religious schools too bold for its time and place?

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Asked to state his political philosophy in a nutshell, long-serving Ontario premier Bill Davis famously said, "Bland works." For his Progressive Conservatives, it worked until 1985, when he made the surprise announcement that his government would extend public funding to Catholic schools through high school. The next year, the Conservatives' 42-year provincial reign ended abruptly, partly because of that issue.

Two decades later, former Davis understudy and current PC Leader John Tory has proposed extending public funding beyond the Catholic system to any or all religious groups. With this controversial step, Mr. Tory has veered well beyond the safe realm of the bland. Mr. Tory describes his \$400-million plan as a way to advance equality for all Ontario's religious groups, and to make religious schools more accountable to the government. His Liberal opponent, Premier Dalton McGuinty, says the plan threatens to undermine public education by drawing money from it.

Although several other provinces already give public funds to religious schools, Mr. Tory's plan is bold because of when and where he proposes it.

It comes at a time when many Canadians are asking whether newcomers are integrating successfully into society. The numbers show that today's newcomers have a harder time in the Canadian economy than their predecessors did a generation ago. Reports of proliferating "ethnic enclaves" cause some to worry about residential segregation. In an Environics poll last year, 65 per cent of Canadians said they agreed that "Too many immigrants do not adopt Canadian values." And last summer, Canadians were dismayed by allegations that several young men raised in Toronto's suburbs were allegedly plotting terrorism under the banner of Islamic fundamentalism.

In view of all this, some Canadians wonder whether their country, which accepts a quarter of a million immigrants a year, is doing enough to bring newcomers and minority groups into the mainstream. In such a diverse society, we rely on public institutions, especially education, to bring people together and develop a shared sense of citizenship. Those who worry about fragmentation will be wary of changes seen as segregating students by religion.

As for the place, Mr. Tory may face another challenge. Of the nearly 252,000 immigrants who arrived in Canada in 2006, half settled in Ontario. If social fragmentation becomes a problem, Ontario is where it will hit fastest and hardest.

But whatever the concerns about cohesion, Mr. Tory's proposal addresses an inconsistency that no one can deny: funding for Catholic education. The province promises religious equality. So by what reasoning are non-Catholics who want their children to receive religious education excluded? It's by inertia rather than reasoning that this inconsistency exists - the public funding of Catholic education in Ontario began before Confederation. There are only two ways to right the inconsistency: Stop funding Catholic schools or start funding the others. Both are politically explosive.

In addition to anxiety about social integration, Mr. Tory's proposal to fund religious schools is confronted by what I believe to be a more profound orientation shared by a majority of Canadians: secularism.

Canadians are serious about the guarantee of religious freedom in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but most are adamant that religion be a private matter. Most Canadians see its influence over public life in the United States and thank God they live here. Some may fear that the public funding of religious schools will threaten our quiet secular consensus by fostering rigid, insular institutions that sow the seeds of future discord over the will of a God most Canadians would rather doubt in private than worship in public.

In short, Mr. Tory's bold plan butts up against some powerful strains in public attitudes. But it also attempts to resolve a hypocrisy in Ontario education.

According to a new Environics poll, just under half of Ontarians (48 per cent) support the resolution of this hypocrisy in the form Mr. Tory proposes, by funding all religious schools that adhere to the public curriculum. Forty-four per cent would rather live with the vestiges of the long history of accommodation between Catholic and Protestant, without adding other religious minorities to the mix. More troubling for Mr. Tory is that more Ontarians strongly oppose his proposal (31 per cent) than strongly favour it (22 per cent). Even among PC supporters, more than a third (36 per cent) oppose it.

No one can say for sure that Mr. Tory's proposals will damage public education, as Mr. McGuinty says. Public education has not been destroyed in the six provinces that do fund religious schools, and history tells us Mr. Davis's decision did not turn Ontario into Northern Ireland.

Mr. Tory's challenge is to describe his plan in a way that helps Ontarians see it as promoting both fairness and social cohesion - not the former at the expense of the latter.

In turn, Ontario's voters must ask: Which is the most sensible and equitable route to the integration of religious minorities and the building of a society in which we all feel we have a stake? They have a right to expect an answer from anyone who wants to run this diverse and rapidly changing province.

Only a true leader will give a substantive answer. And who knows? Maybe once in a while we'll find a leader who can go beyond bland - even in an election campaign.

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