

# LET'S TALK ABOUT SCHOOLS:

## *Educational Policy-Making in British Columbia in the 1970s and 1980s*

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THE LAST QUARTER OF the twentieth century is widely seen as a neoliberal age. Rooted in the thought of Austrian Friedrich Hayek and the ideas of Chicago economist Milton Friedman, and given purchase through the policies of Ronald Reagan in the United States, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, and other politicians elsewhere, neoliberal, or “post liberal” (Fleming 1991), governments align themselves ideologically with the political right. They are typified by centralization of power and financial and regulatory control and anti-union legislation, accelerating fiscally conservative policies that promote the private sector and reduce state involvement in the lives of citizens.

Governance in British Columbia in the 1970s and 1980s largely followed this model (Dyck 1986). Through privatization and deregulation, the Social Credit governments that held office through most of these years transferred much control of the province’s economy from the public to the private sector. Accompanying these measures was the neoliberal view that education is a private rather than a public good (Apple 2006). Between the mid-1970s and the rewriting of the *School Act* in 1989, the funding allocated to education in British Columbia declined both in dollar terms and as a percentage of provincial GDP (Bowman 1990); school boards had little decision-making authority and were increasingly required to follow government dictates.

Professor of administration and sometime coordinator of political action at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Richard G. Townsend (1988), characterizes politics in British Columbia’s educational system during the 1970s and 1980s as “discordant” and sees it as mirroring the bipolarity in the province’s political culture. In Townsend’s terms, a concordant political system is consensual, accepting, and trusting, but, as Bedard (1992, 33) and others note, “the salient feature of the BC political culture is discord, with both sides juxtaposed in a symbiotic tug-of-war characterized by conflict, moralism, cynicism, and cabal-finding.”

## THE W.A.C. BENNETT YEARS

Six Social Credit administrations under the leadership of W.A.C. Bennett governed British Columbia from 1952 to 1972, a period of tremendous population growth and economic expansion. Bennett, known as the “builder of British Columbia,” expanded highways, increased public services, and constructed hydroelectric dams. Early in his administration he commissioned the Royal Commission on Education in British Columbia, led by S.N.F. Chant (1960).<sup>1</sup> The *Chant Report* emphasized intellectual development as the general aim of British Columbia’s public school system. Its specific curricular, governance, financial, and administrative recommendations provided the basic framework for the province’s growing public education system until the 1988 Royal Commission on Education report filed by Commissioner Barry Sullivan (Barman and Sutherland 1995). During Bennett’s time as premier, new schools were built and older ones renovated to accommodate the “baby boomers.” New equipment was acquired and the latest technology was instituted; many teachers, administrators, and support workers were hired; and pupil-teacher ratios were reduced. Teacher salaries tripled in the twenty years after 1952 (when inflation ran at an average 1.7 percent per annum), from an average of \$3,584 to an average of \$11,308 (Kavic and Nixon 1978). In 1971, Bennett’s government introduced legislation to eliminate compulsory membership in the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) and to limit teachers’ salary increases to 6.5 percent per annum.

## THE NDP YEARS

In the 1972 provincial election, the BCTF campaigned against the Social Credit party, which was defeated (Bedard 1992; Killian 1985; Kuehn 1988; Persky 1978). Former education critic Eileen Dailly became education minister and deputy premier in the New Democratic Party (NDP) government led by David Barrett. Almost immediately, she banned corporal punishment in schools, eliminated regular Grade 12 government examinations, revised the school accreditation process, reformed the taxation authority of local school boards, required that kindergartens be funded out of school board budgets, helped to create the first Aboriginal school district in the Nass River Valley, appointed the first female school superintendent in the province, and offered financial incentives for programs that met local “community needs.”

<sup>1</sup> See Johnson (1964, 255-71) for an overview of the Chant Report.

In 1973, the government overrode the recommendation of its ad hoc committee of MLAs and appointed John “the dreamer” Bremer as commissioner of education, with a mandate to evaluate the province’s school system and to provide specific information and recommendations to the minister. Bremer, a self-styled “egalitarian progressive” (Bremer 1975), was fired by the premier after only nine months on the job, during a television interview in which Bremer’s comments aligned with the opposition’s educational policies. Many thus concluded that the Department of Education was controlled by the premier, not by Minister Dailly.

UBC education professor Marvin Lazerson suggested that “the Minister of Education’s inability to hold to a consistent transfer of decision-making authority to local communities, and her failure to provide leadership in supporting new pedagogical and curricula innovation” were signs of weak leadership (“Education: NDP Bad, Socreds Worse,” *Vancouver Sun*, 9 December 1975). Despite her actions to liberalize schools, Dailly’s term as minister of education is remembered for a 1974 White Paper, “The Public School System: Directions for Change.” This report blamed the school system for not “providing a satisfactory educational experience for many pupils” and insisted that “every person must be functionally literate, that is, every person must be able to read, to write, to compute, to hear, to understand, and to judge” (British Columbia Department of Education, 1974, 9). The first public government document to use the term “core curriculum,” the report describes an education system in which students would study such topics as family life, Canadian studies, labour and environmental issues, economics, and law, and would learn to appreciate art and music (British Columbia Department of Education 1974; Schutz 1979). The focus of much debate in the mid-1970s, the White Paper produced no significant reforms. Dailly’s education policies and her promotion of a decentralized system may have contributed to the downfall of the NDP, as many teacher-activists and organizers refused to work for the party in the 1975 election campaign (Persky 1978).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In 1975, BCTF president Adam Robertson heralded a new political stance for the BCTF. On behalf of all teachers, Robertson declared the bctf’s intention to fight to change the government of the day in the next provincial election. Teachers were angry with the NDP’s legislation restricting a school district’s ability to raise revenue, with government attempts to chip away at the tenure rights of teachers, and with the government-imposed ceilings for arbitrated teacher salary increases (Novakowski 2004). Dailly, however, remained an MLA for Burnaby North from 1966 until her retirement in 1986.

PAT McGEER, SOCIAL CREDIT POLICY,  
AND BACK TO THE BASICS

When W.R. (Bill) Bennett's Social Credit Party formed the province's new government in 1975, Pat McGeer, a provincial Liberal recruited to the Social Credit coalition in 1974, became minister of education. During his four-year term, McGeer changed the face of public and private education in British Columbia. In contrast to Dailly's decentralized system, McGeer developed highly centralized bureaucratic systems to ensure local compliance with government and ministerial mandates, and bolstered standardized measures of student achievement through the re-implementation of government examinations (Bedard 1992; Fisher 1988).

In British Columbia, as across North America, an ideologically conservative "back-to-the-basics" core curriculum radically different from that proposed by the NDP was implemented (Kilian 1985). McGeer believed that a majority of BC parents wanted a structured curriculum and proof that teachers were teaching and students were learning. Developed by McGeer and his deputy ministers, Walter Hardwick and Jim Carter, "What Should Our Children Be Learning?" specified thirteen goals and 178 learning objectives and focused on non-electives such as English, math, and science, espousing a traditional pedagogy based on drill, homework, and testing (BC Ministry of Education 1976; Brodinsky 1977). Though this core curriculum was simply a restatement of existing curricular goals, all curricular outcomes were compiled into one document and made public. Further, British Columbia was facing an economic crisis at this time, with a high rate of youth unemployment. Satisfying private business needs became a goal of education, with "excellence," "efficiency," and "accountability" the new buzzwords in the system (Elliot and Maclennan 1994). Marketable skills training and pre-apprenticeship and pre-employment vocational training programs were developed and instituted (Savage 1988, 16) "to see that high school students had marketable skills to accompany their graduation certificates" (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1978).

CORE CURRICULUM AND THE PROVINCIAL LEARNING  
ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

To increase accountability, McGeer created the Provincial Learning Assessment Program (PLAP), a standardized examination system to measure student achievement. A minimum curricular competency cri-

terion was developed along with rigorous proficiency testing, and, for the first time, children and schools would be provincially ranked and sorted based on achievement criteria. Educational policy analysts suggest that PLAP was meant to measure the core curriculum, to correlate test scores and the economy, to measure basic skills of students, and to establish financial accountability through the centralization of educational decision making (Bowe, Ball, and Gold 1992; Persky 1978; Stanley 1988; Wotherspoon 1989, 386) – a move that teachers viewed as unwelcome interference in their professional educational decisions. Ministry of Education assistant deputy minister of policy development, Jim Carter, in line with conservative notions, indicated that he wanted more structure in school classrooms, not less (personal communication, 19 December 1997); for conservative educators, PLAP was a necessary corrective to progressive notions of child-centredness, the proliferation of school subjects, greater student choice of courses at the secondary school level, open classrooms, “learn-at-your-own-pace” philosophies, and team teaching – all relatively unstructured programs designed to help students develop individual responsibility (ironically, a tenet of neoliberal philosophy).

After the first provincial assessment in 1976, the basic reading and writing skills of BC students were deemed inadequate by McGeer, who, along with Deputy Minister of Education Walter Hardwick, both UBC professors (neither from the Faculty of Education), lamented the decline of English skills in first-year UBC students. As a response, the discipline of provincial exams was reinstated for some, but not all, Grade 12 students.

## INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS LEGISLATION

Until 1977, British Columbia was the only province that funded only non-denominational public schools (Downey 1986). During the 1972 provincial election campaign, Premier Bennett stated: “Public policy is to encourage people to go to public schools” (314).

Immediately after that election, the Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Fundamentalist members of the defeated Social Credit Party sponsored a motion encouraging legislative recognition of, and financial support for, private schools. The Federation of Independent Schools Association (FISA), a grassroots political organization, lobbied government for funding, and, by the 1975 election campaign, all parties were on the bandwagon. The NDP promised private schools funding for transportation and improved library services, the Social Credit Party

promised legislative recognition and financial support, and the Liberals promised 60 percent funding support.

Upon election in 1975, the Social Credit government immediately moved to implement independent school funding. Bill 33, the *Independent Schools Support Act*, was written behind closed doors by Ministry of Education policy advisors and legal officers. McGeer proposed direct fee refunds to parents and unencumbered grants to private schools. Deputy Minister Hardwick supported funding for independent schools (J. Bowman, personal communication, 12 December 1997), and Assistant Deputy Minister Jim Carter believed that “a good independent system was a nice complement to a good public system” (personal communication, 19 December 1997).

In Canada, most private schools are for-profit schools, while independent schools are generally run by not-for-profit organizations. However, independent schools in British Columbia may be operated as societies incorporated under the *Society Act*, as companies within the meaning of the *Business Corporations Act*, or as corporations incorporated under a private act (or by a person designated, by regulation, as an authority that operates or intends to operate an independent school).

Thus, consistent with the Social Credit Party’s commitment to the goals of freedom of choice, privatization, competition in the education sector, and accountability (Waymark 1988), the *Independent Schools Support Act* (1977) had a greater impact than did any other piece of legislation introduced by McGeer, fundamentally altering education in British Columbia by extending public funding to private and independent schools for the first time in provincial history. In an astute political move, McGeer funded both the poor Catholic schools on Vancouver’s East Side and the elite private schools on Vancouver’s West Side. By extending funding to all independent schools, he appeared to allocate resources equitably to all sectors of society.

*School Act* revisions authorized the minister to develop regulations for both independent and public schools and centralized political power in the minister’s office. The revisions also tied school financing to quantifiable assessment measures, available through PLAP, thus demonstrating government commitment to private-sector models of education and assuring financial accountability for independent and public schools. The larger debate surrounding the legitimacy of public funding for minority interests was ignored, and questions with respect to standards, quality of educational experiences, and the erosion of funds for public schools were hardly raised outside the teaching profession (Spreen and Vally 2014).

## BRIAN SMITH AND THE APPLE REPORT

In 1979, Premier Bill Bennett called a provincial election in which the Social Credit Party was re-elected, albeit with a reduced majority. Having accomplished his goal of making the education system more accountable and relevant to students heading to university or the workplace, McGeer was promoted to the Ministry of Universities, Science and Communications. Bennett, well aware that members of the BC education system had been politicized by McGeer's domineering personality,<sup>3</sup> appointed his more conciliatory friend, Brian Smith, a lawyer and instructor in the University of Victoria's new law school, to his first cabinet portfolio as minister of education.

One of Smith's first initiatives was his "Fall 1980 Tour,"<sup>4</sup> in which he "conducted an intensive educational tour of British Columbia to determine what the people of [the] province wanted in their education system" (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1981, 3). Smith accepted personal responsibility for the project, and the results were threefold: the publication of *Education: A Report from the Minister*,<sup>5</sup> more commonly known as the Apple Report (so named after the large apple adorning its cover); a major revision of the *School Act* for the first time in fourteen years, and, perhaps most importantly, the calming of the political turmoil created by McGeer, with new confidence and enthusiasm instilled in teachers and the general public.

As Smith indicated in his introduction to the Apple Report, he sought change that would lead to standardization and improvement of services to students. He wrote the report in the first person, relying on "critical studies," none of which is referenced, to "illuminate the report." The result was a folksy, conciliatory document on the state of education in the province. Most elements of the provincial system would be reformed in some way, and a series of policy initiatives were proposed. Unlike his immediate predecessor, however, Smith rejected radical reforms, approaching policy change incrementally. He recommended that "action be taken" in the fields of curriculum; teacher education; personnel relations in schools and districts; classification of children with special needs; northern, rural, and small school initiatives; facilities and capital equipment expenditures; textbook support; independent schools; and

<sup>3</sup> Including members of the educational policy community, teachers, and school board trustees.

<sup>4</sup> Fall information gathering trips and visits to school districts and schools would become standard for education ministers from this point forward.

<sup>5</sup> Smith's report drew on forty-one professional and public forums, nineteen "open student forums" in schools, and unannounced visits to schools and classrooms.

postsecondary education concerns (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1981).<sup>6</sup>

Appraisals of Smith's report were consistently negative: it was "eminently forgettable" and a "do nothing report" (Jim Carter, personal communication, 19 December 1997). The BCTF, which had closely monitored Smith during his tour, criticized the report as vague and open to wide interpretation, and was not surprised that collective bargaining was not mentioned ("Teachers Angry over 'Vague' Report," *Vancouver Province*, 28 August 1981).

The sole significant and lasting curricular change produced by the Apple Report was the surprising and immediate implementation of a new compulsory course – Consumer Fundamentals 9/10, 11/12 – which effectively crowded out elective choice for Grade 11 and Grade 12 students. Because Smith claimed the policy proposals and changes outlined in the report as his "personal objectives for education in the future," Consumer Fundamentals may have been a whim of the minister, a relatively uncontroversial way to place his personal stamp on the system (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1981, 3). Alternatively, it might have reflected the business philosophy and free-enterprise beliefs of the Social Credit government. The right-wing Fraser Institute had lobbied the premier, ministers, and cabinet for "business friendly" changes, such as entrepreneurial education, and it is entirely possible Smith felt pressure from Premier Bennett or that he had accepted that some form of consumer education program was necessary in schools long before his fall tour (Leslie 1991).

Another outcome of the report was the creation of an education finance research unit (including Deputy Minister Jim Carter [as chair] and Assistant Deputy Minister of Education Finance Jack Fleming) to review school financial issues and to develop restraint plans for the education system (Fleming 1985). Fleming chaired a committee within the Finance Research Unit to investigate school taxation. The Fleming Report (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1982) emphasized the need for tighter provincial control over education funding, noting that the financing of education relied heavily on local property taxes.

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<sup>6</sup> Other changes included new legislation to provide more appropriate penalties for convicted intruders on school premises, the appointment of a multicultural program coordinator, the implementation of three financial taxation items, reorganization of the Ministry of Education, improved consultation between the ministry and interested educational groups, achievement tests and establishment of provincial norms, and encouragement of parent involvement in schools (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1981, 164–65).

Fleming's recommendations were the basis for the fiscal framework included in the *Education (Interim) Finance Act* (1982), a strategic first piece of fiscal restraint legislation which removed local school board authority to assess industrial and commercial property taxes and gave Victoria power to limit school board budgets by reducing grants. The act equalized the financing of school districts and established a uniform rate of provincial taxes. Further, it centralized financial control of school district expenses and, thus, teacher salaries, in Victoria. The provincial government assumed control of the amount of funding transferred to school districts, thus implementing the fiscally conservative goals of controlling economic expenditures and reducing taxes for business organizations. The government offered two financial reasons for introducing the *Education (Interim) Finance Act*: first, the financing of districts could be equalized and not subject to local fluctuations in the tax base, and, second, businesses could establish themselves anywhere in the province if a uniform rate of provincial taxes existed (Magnusson et al. 1984). This dual action alienated school boards, which were forced to cut back non-personnel expenditures in order to honour previously negotiated employee and teacher contracts, and it agitated the BCTF, which, in 1982, initiated the Defend Education Services Coalition (DESC) comprised of school support workers, college instructors, and postsecondary students (BCTF 2016).

Brian Smith retained his portfolio for a year following the release of the Apple Report but was shuffled out of education in favour of "Bill" Vander Zalm in 1982.<sup>7</sup> Vander Zalm had no experience in education but was seen as a tough minister: as minister of social services, he had proposed that welfare recipients in the province be given a shovel and required to work for their welfare cheques. He was supported by many religious fundamentalists and right-wing fanatics, and was thus a potential threat to Bennett's coalition (Garr 1985). Bennett moved Vander Zalm into what was going to be a very difficult portfolio. Although Premier Bennett made all major restraint policy announcements, he left unpopular announcements in education to Vander Zalm, who expressed concern over lax standards in schools. His strategy – following McGeer's Core Curriculum and PLAP initiatives but ignoring Smith's Apple

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<sup>7</sup> When asked about Vander Zalm, Jim Carter noted: "Smith was viewed as a good minister, [so] would Smith be the person that [Bennett] would want to push out? To restrain the whole education system after being so good at calming things? Who would he like to have do the restraint? And further, who may have been an internal threat?" (personal communication, 17 December 1997).

Report – was to create assessment and reporting procedures to compare school district spending and student achievement.

By identifying himself and his government with the notion of restraint, Premier Bennett and his “anti-intellectual” government cultivated an image of neoliberal fiscal competence, conservatism, and determination in the face of what he called the nearsighted selfishness of such special interest groups as teachers and other public-sector employees (Fisher and Gilgoff 1987, 89; Magnusson et al. 1984, 75). This helped create what Larry Kuehn, then president of the BCTF, characterized as “a slow haemorrhage of resources, and a severe psychological battering of everyone who worked in the [education] system,” and led directly to some of the most controversial and divisive times in British Columbia’s education history: the “School Wars” of the 1980s (Kilian 1985; Kuehn 1988, 84).

#### EDUCATION AND RESTRAINT: THE “SCHOOL WARS”

With the re-election of his Social Credit government in 1983, Premier Bennett appointed “Jolly Jack” Heinrich education minister in an effort to regain credibility and to promote civility in education. Working in the face of major restraint legislation, however, Heinrich did not prove to be the hoped-for conciliator. In July of 1983, soon after his appointment, the government introduced twenty-six bills into the legislature intended to restructure labour relations, human rights, and social spending in British Columbia. For the first time since the Depression, there would be a 0 percent increase in education budgets in the province.

Bill 11, the *Compensation Stabilization Amendment Act*, extended public-sector wage controls indefinitely and made the employer’s ability to pay paramount, thus limiting salary and benefit increases for school district employees. The government’s restraint agenda decimated the social safety net; created permanent wage controls for public servants within the range of +5 to -5 percent; permitted public-sector employers to fire employees, including teachers, without cause; and eliminated three thousand teaching positions. Further, between 1982 and 1986, the Ministry of Education was reduced from approximately 750 employees to 350.

The Fiscal Framework, an allocation device used to determine the proportion of provincial education funds that would go to each school district, also came into effect at this time. Comprised of over fifty programs and formulae used to categorize school spending and

determine the cost of operating any program in any school district, it tied financing of educational programs to specific ministry-determined criteria. This caused numerous problems for school districts. As school boards struggled to adapt to the new reality, the ministry changed the funding formula seven times before finally determining district budgets.

Enacted in July 1983, Bill 3, the *Public Sector Restraint Act*, severely restricted school spending. School board budgets would be reduced by 25 percent until 1986, schools were required to close for six days during the school year, and teachers' salaries were reduced by 3 percent while pupil-teacher ratios increased ("Trustees Worry about Centralization," *Times Colonist*, 22 July 1983). Added to these measures were curricular changes as well as decreased local autonomy and increased centralization of funding and decision making.

Fiscal tightening wasn't the only neoliberal agenda enabled under the new legislation, however. With the introduction of Bill 3, principals and vice-principals were designated "senior managers" and given the ability to fire workers without cause at the conclusion or suspension of a collective agreement, a situation that created a significant cleavage between them and the majority of their teaching colleagues (Magnusson et al. 1984). Principals viewed their new managerial designation as compounding their problems rather than as a solution to the impasse with the BCTF, which had to protect members who did not want to be members, while principals had to rely on the BCTF to protect them even though they had publicly and privately campaigned against membership (Wotherspoon 1989). In response to this growing division, some principals created a separate organization not affiliated with the BCTF: the British Columbia School Administrators' Association (BCSAA). However, due to BCTF bylaws, the BCSAA could not directly represent itself to the Ministry of Education without first having its opinions vetted by the BCTF executive.

Dozens of school boards and superintendents revolted against Bill 3, and the BCTF responded with increased political action as their members' self-image of the "teacher as professional" gave way to the idea of "teacher as worker" (Bedard 1992; Kilian 1985; Wotherspoon 1989). In response to the wage-control measures and cutbacks, "Operation Solidarity," a coalition of labour unions and associations, including the BCTF, formed in 1982. Incensed by Bill 3, particularly the section that allowed teachers to be fired without cause, a BCTF-led Operation Solidarity brought the province to the brink of a general strike in November 1983 (BCTF 2016).

The legislation went ahead as planned, however, and problems came to a head in 1984, when, in an attempt to force the amendment of Bill 3, 90 percent of public school teachers called a three-day “strike.” Trustees declared any strike by teachers illegal, so, because teachers were not recognized as employees under provisions of the *Labour Code*, and because the *School Act* was silent on withdrawal of services, teachers called their job action a “political protest.” The government’s response to the “protest” was swift. Many teachers and most principals who participated in it received disciplinary letters in their files, and Premier Bennett announced that teachers could be fired for withdrawing their services and could have their teacher certification revoked.

Under threat of legal action from members and school boards, the BCTF recognized for the first time the “special” role of principals and allowed them to open schools for the first day of the protest. This exacerbated the divide within the BCTF as, during the protest, principals were permitted to carry on their work without fear of consequence, while teachers were not.

#### JACK HEINRICH AND GRAD '87

Due to the provisions of Bill 11, public-sector morale was at an all-time low, and the business community did not help by claiming that students were not being taught “relevant skills” for the jobs available upon graduation (Keith Gray, VP British Columbia Business Council, personal communication, 20 November 1997). Minister Heinrich’s effort to silence critics who saw valuable school resources wasted on “fringe” courses was a White Paper on the state of the secondary school curriculum in the province, commonly known as *Grad '87* (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1984b).

*Grad '87's* foreword states that parents and the general public were “demanding that secondary schools provide all students with a greater sense of challenge, increased clarity of direction, and better recognition of accomplishment.” In this new vision, the reinstatement of universal provincial examinations, eliminated by the NDP, was combined with an increase in the number of courses required for graduation from Grade 12; students were placed into one of three programs of study (Arts and Science, Applied Arts and Science, or Career Preparation); completion of one course each in math and science was required during Grades 11 and 12; four courses at the Grade 12 level were required to

have Grade 11 prerequisites; and Physical Education 11 was dropped as a compulsory course (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1984b, 11–12).

Physical education, compulsory since the 1930s, was changed to an elective starting in September 1985.

[The Social Credit Cabinet] turfed it out and it was terrible in fact because they didn't consult with anybody, they just did it. One cabinet minister's daughter forgot her running shoes one day, and didn't get credit for PE. [He] said, "Why is it compulsory? I move it not be compulsory." And so that was the decision. I came back three times, the third time I came back they were ready to strangle me, they said, "No, it's done, get the hell out of here." (Jim Carter, personal communication, 19 December 1997)

This evidence throws a dubious light on Heinrich's claim that "the constructive criticism which is coming in is most helpful; all of it will be taken into consideration" (*Hansard* 1984). He listened to concerns expressed by his cabinet colleagues, not those of his officials, not experts in physical education, and certainly not PE teachers. A teacher in Coquitlam said: "As a PE co-ordinator I am very concerned about the drop in the number of Grade 11 students who are choosing PE. This is the first year (1985) that the course is an elective: 50% of the Grade 11 students are taking it. For next year, just over 25% have signed up" (BCTF 1986, 50). The problem Heinrich faced was how to explain this arbitrary act to the public, for he could hardly admit that it was the result of a cabinet minister's annoyance over his daughter's irresponsibility. Therefore, the change was buried within a package that increased structure and direction and reinforced neoliberal ideology at the senior high level while removing what was painted by cabinet as a marginally beneficial course.

The revised graduation requirements proposed in *Grad '87* were announced in October 1984 (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1984a). Over two thousand responses to the proposed changes had been submitted, and extensive course enrolment simulations involving approximately four thousand students from around the province were analyzed. Heinrich recognized that many respondents opposed "streaming" students by ability (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1984b, 2), and his solution was simple. Students aiming to graduate in 1987 would need a minimum of four Grade 12-level courses and their Grade 11-level prerequisites. Students thus had to commit to both Grade 11 and Grade 12 courses to graduate within the expected time frame. "The revised requirements will reflect, in total, success over a two-year program

in each area” (ibid.). In reality, by forcing students to select two years of study as they entered Grade 11, the minister was streaming students into particular programs of study without acknowledging that this was what he was doing.

Crawford Kilian (1985, 120), a vocal critic of educational policy, characterized the *Grad '87* changes as “purely political” and as a “sham and a scam” designed to create the appearance of more challenge, of raising standards, and of getting back to the basics so that an “essentially ignorant part of the public will feel, dimly, that something is being done.” In a Gallup Poll, 70 percent of the public and 80 percent of the professionals surveyed said the quality of schools had decreased during the previous five years (PSRC 1985 Vol. 3), and 80 percent of respondents indicated that existing levels of provincial and local funding for schools failed to meet community standards. This prompted the *Vancouver Sun* (“F” for Schools,” 27 August 1985) to report that schools were “failing,” while the *Times Colonist* (“And Now the Poll That Can’t Be Ignored,” 3 September 1985) called for significant changes to restraint and an end to confrontation in education.

The most damning comment on *Grad '87* came later in the 1988 Royal Commission Report:

Unfortunately, the changed graduation requirements that saw the addition of compulsory courses in consumer education, mathematics, and science impacted severely on elective areas of the curriculum; these include locally developed courses, the fine arts, industrial education and home economics, which are a value to all students but particularly those who are not pursuing university entrance. As a consequence of these recent graduation requirements, enrolments in these electives fell substantially and drop-out rates increased. The Commission strongly suggests that the Ministry of Education should re-examine these graduation requirements as one step toward halting the exodus of young people from our secondary schools. (Sullivan 1988, 104)

Most of the changes mooted in *Grad '87* were implemented. Of particular note were new courses in Japanese and Mandarin languages, which fit well with British Columbia’s strong business ties with Pacific Rim countries. In addition, even though the core curriculum and PLAP were in place prior to 1984, not all Grade 12 students had to write provincial examinations. Students receiving a C+ grade or better received recommendations from their teachers, who therefore had significant discretionary ability to pass students simply by awarding a C+. This was

unacceptable to Vander Zalm, elected premier of the province in 1986. He extended McGeer's performance standards to their logical conclusion: everyone, regardless of circumstance or intellectual ability, had to pass an externally determined, standardized evaluation instrument in order to graduate. Jim Carter argued that some students deserved to be recommended because it was cost-effective and rewarded those who had worked hard throughout the course. Vander Zalm and cabinet were insistent that all graduating students would have to write government exams, so Carter and other senior ministry bureaucrats achieved a compromise, with 50 percent of a student's mark coming from the exam and 50 percent from the classroom teacher (personal communication, 19 December 1997).

#### LET'S TALK ABOUT SCHOOLS (LTAS)

Extensive criticism of the *Grad '87* proposals and continuing conflicts with school boards and teachers regarding funding, curriculum, and employee relations prompted a meeting between the British Columbia School Trustees Association (BCSTA) and Minister Heinrich, in which trustees repeated their call for a Royal Commission on education. However, Heinrich had just removed some of the last vestiges of school board control over local matters with revisions to the *Education (Interim) Finance Act* and was not willing to risk a commission that might criticize the cutbacks and centralization moves in the restraint legislation.

Instead, the minister established an advisory committee to review the possibility of rewriting the *School Act*. The committee prepared a background paper, *Let's Talk about Schools*,<sup>8</sup> to stimulate discussion of major educational questions, current and future issues facing schools, and possible directions for schooling in British Columbia.<sup>9</sup> The original advisory committee was replaced by the Provincial School Review Committee (PSRC), a group with broad community representation, to oversee the collection and analysis of over thirty-five hundred individual responses.

The Provincial School Review Committee initially consisted of nineteen members. Citing personal time commitments and the tight timelines imposed to complete the review, three members, including Joy

<sup>8</sup> The pamphlet, *Let's Talk about Schools: A Discussion Paper on British Columbia Schools*, a glossy thirty-two pages full of pictures, was distributed throughout the province in December of 1984.

<sup>9</sup> Public hearings were held in February and March of 1985, a Gallup Poll was conducted to solicit the views of eight hundred members of the public and 609 education professionals, including public and private school teachers, principals and vice-principals, superintendents, secretary treasurers, and directors and supervisors of instruction.

Leach (past president of the BCSTA) and Elmer Froese (superintendent of the Burnaby School District) resigned. Leach, particularly concerned with the centralization of power in Victoria (Joy Leach, personal communication, 14 December 1997), believed the public hearings had already provided the government with the answers to the questions posed in *LTAS*. However, the public responses gathered would spur no changes in direction.<sup>10</sup>

The BCTF refused to allow any of its members to sit on the provincial school review committee and insisted that its past president and executive director be the teacher representatives (paralleling the representation enjoyed by the BCSTA). Heinrich rejected this suggestion and instead appointed a teacher on leave from Delta and a private-school vice-principal from McGeer's riding. Deputy Minister Carter called the decision to not allow teachers to appoint their own representatives a

dreadful error, the level of animosity, the level of anger wouldn't allow the government to say 'hey, let's just take whoever they [i.e., the BCTF] give us and put them on the committee.' Looking back it was dumb, it was dumb of the government and I'm sure some things were dumb of the BCTF too. (personal communication, 19 December 1997)

Jim Bowman, on staff at the BCTF at the time, indicated that the government simply wanted to be seen to be doing something to quiet the school wars. He stated that the Social Credit government didn't want a Royal Commission because if a genuine public inquiry were held, and "the stones [were] lifted up and there [were] things crawling around underneath, that gets reported, it doesn't get brushed aside quickly before anybody sees it" (personal communication, 12 December 1997). But *LTAS* was more than a political document designed to deflect criticism of government education policies. Deputy Minister Jim Carter recognized that the trust level among education policy actors had to be rebuilt following "three years of hell," and he appointed Tom Fleming to write *LTAS*, which was designed to refocus educational discussions on children and education.<sup>11</sup> There appeared to be a genuine desire to repair the system while remaining committed to restraint.

<sup>10</sup> David Poole, later to become Premier Vander Zalm's deputy minister, said of *LTAS*: "This is a document written by insiders for insiders about how you're going to divvy up the educational spoils. This has got nothing to do with the public in public education. If I was a member of the public, I would be looking for this committee and I would set out to lynch them because my interests as a member of the public haven't been represented here. This is the same old gang just dividing up stuff behind closed doors" (personal communication, 5 March 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Fleming, a University of Victoria education professor, came up with the "folksy, accessible" name. Fleming was later to be the primary writer of the Sullivan Royal Commission on

## PREMIER BILL VANDER ZALM'S EDUCATIONAL INTERFERENCE

In 1986, Heinrich was replaced by Jim Hewitt as caretaker minister until Vander Zalm appointed a former teacher and principal from British Columbia's Peace River District, Tony Brummet, minister of education.<sup>12</sup> As promised by both the Social Credit and opposition NDP during the election campaign, the government established the Royal Commission on Education on 14 March 1987. Commissioner Barry M. Sullivan was to inquire into and report on the state of BC education from kindergarten to Grade 12. Many heralded this as a positive step towards ending the still-simmering school wars, but two controversial bills introduced two weeks later served to further fan the flames.

On 2 April 1987, the government introduced Bill 19 (the *Industrial Relations Act*), which repealed the *Compensation Stabilization Act* and the *Public Sector Restraint Act*, 1983, stating that its aim was to strike a balance between labour and management and to increase fairness in labour relations, equity, and democratic rights for people (*Hansard* 1987).

The existing Labour Relations Board and the *Labour Code* would be administered by the new Industrial Relations Council (IRC), with authority to reject or alter any public- or private-sector contract deemed not in the public interest. The state and employers would be able to intervene directly in collectively negotiated contracts and to interfere with union certification matters. Further, the IRC and its commissioner could designate public and private workers in the human resource, health, safety, transportation, and education sectors as essential services (Province of British Columbia 1987).

The NDP characterized Bill 19 as a neoliberal document and an attempt to de-unionize British Columbia and "bring back a 19th-century liberal laissez-faire economy which does not have unions to get in the way of [entrepreneurs] making money" ("NDP Fails to 'Hoist' Labour Reform Bill," *Times Colonist*, 15 April 1987).

## POLICY AND POLITICS OF BILL 20

Intrinsically tied to Bill 19, Bill 20, the *Teaching Profession Act*, appeared to solve many problems in the education sector: it dealt with teachers' collective bargaining issues, separated principals from the unionized BCTF into their own association, and created the BC College of Teachers

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Education report.

<sup>12</sup> Brummet was previously minister of lands, parks and housing and minister of environment during the period between 1982 and 1986.

(BCCT), the first of its kind in Canada, as a separate governing entity over both the unionized teachers and associated principals.

Teachers had demanded collective bargaining rights since the 1920s (Wotherspoon 1989). In 1974, teachers were offered bargaining rights under the *Labour Code*, but the BCTF called for special status as most teachers did not see themselves as belonging to the same category as resource-sector workers. If recognized under the *Labour Code*, teachers would legally have been able to strike, something successive Social Credit administrations had denied them, so, in 1985, BC teachers launched a \$1 million *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* challenge in the Supreme Court of Canada, complaining of discrimination because they were not allowed to organize as a union (Bishop 1996, 60). Deputy Minister Carter advised government that the Supreme Court would almost certainly rule in favour of the teachers (Jim Carter, personal communication, 19 December 1997).

The premier was not averse to teachers negotiating full collective bargaining rights, but he was in favour of allowing negotiations in individual units and was hoping to break up the BCTF. Government offered teachers two options: (1) an “association” model with limited bargaining rights and no strike option or (2) a “union” model with the right to strike and the ability to negotiate the full scope of employment conditions. Vander Zalm believed many teachers would, if given the option, reject BCTF union membership and opt to form professional associations under the provisions of the new legislation, and he assumed that professional teachers would want to individually bargain wages and benefits (David Poole, personal communication, 5 March 1998). However, all seventy-six locals of the BCTF chose the union model, and, by early 1988, 90 percent of teachers in the province had joined the BCTF, which was certified under the *Industrial Relations Act* as the official bargaining agent for all BC public school teachers.

The most significant component of Bill 20 was the establishment of the College of Teachers. Until 1987, the government had controlled the training, certification, and discipline of teachers through two ministry committees: the Certification Advisory Committee and the Joint Teacher Education Committee, consisting of Ministry of Education officials, BCTF and BCSTA members, and university representatives.

Premier Vander Zalm believed strongly that anything the public sector could do, the private sector could do better (Leslie 1991), and Minister Brummet stated that the BCCT would allow teachers to “enjoy the same status as other professional associations in British Columbia while providing [teachers] with the mandate to control the quality of entrant

into the teaching ranks" (*Hansard*, 2 April 1987). Premier Vander Zalm also suggested that child abuse charges against teachers was a key factor (a much publicized inquiry into child abuse in the province had specified that union representation be separate from discipline and professional development activities). With the establishment of the BCCT, the government relinquished responsibility; the new college was granted legal authority to set standards for teacher certification and discipline, to recommend the most effective way of training and retraining teachers, and to design and support professional development programs.

Some have speculated that the new BCCT, based on models in the medical and legal professions, was a concrete example of privatization (Sheehan and Wilson 1995). It fit with other political initiatives reflective of the neoliberal, fiscally conservative orientation of the Social Credit government of the time, following a moderately successful privatization exercise in the Attorney General's ministry under Bill Bennett's government and an ambitious money-saving privatization scheme in August 1987, which involved two Crown corporations and eleven government operations being sold or transferred, shifting seventy-two hundred public-sector workers into the private sector (Leslie 1991).

This fiscal success made the argument for independent or private certification of teachers seem logical. Members of the BCCT would pay fees to support the organization, a user-pay system of control whereby teachers, not government, would bear the cost of certification, discipline, and professional development. This diminished public oversight of the teaching profession, which would henceforth regulate itself, though government kept its hand in: twenty members originally governed the BCCT, fifteen elected by members of the college and five appointed by government.

The *Teaching Profession Act* made BCCT membership for all administrators and teachers in public and independent schools in the province mandatory, while membership in the BCTF became voluntary. Principals were designated management (Jim Carter, personal communication, 19 December 1997), able to participate in the collective bargaining process as educational managers responsible for school programs and personnel (Province of British Columbia 1987b) but exempt from the BCTF's collective bargaining agreement. Principals and vice-principals had long been pressing for separation from the BCTF as they were restricted from serving on BCTF committees, complained they had no voice in the organization even though they paid higher membership fees due to their higher income, and, most importantly, felt that managerial functions in

the school took legal precedence over teaching functions (Jim Carter, personal communication, 19 December 1997). Matters came to a head in the fall of 1986, when the BC Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association formally sought to withdraw from the Federation (Wotherspoon 1989).

Minister Tony Brummet supported removal of principals from the bargaining unit, suggesting that the people who were evaluating and writing reports on teachers and deciding whether they keep their jobs or get fired could not be members of the same union (personal communication, 20 July 1998). As Vander Zalm's deputy minister, David Poole, noted:

The college was made specifically to separate principals from teachers. I can remember Vander Zalm and I having lengthy discussions about [the need] to have management in the schools that was not in the same union as the teachers. There was a lot of discussion at that time about could you have school managers, that there might be a head teacher and school managers who may or may not be educators. It didn't go that far but it was specifically to separate the two. (personal communication, 5 March 1998)

Bills 19 and 20 had come as a surprise to teachers and other public-sector employees. Minister Brummet had touted "wide consultation with the education community" in the design of Bill 20 (*Hansard*, 2 April 1987), and Vander Zalm asserted that Bill 19 had been drafted in a spirit of cooperation and consultation, with public hearings and submissions solicited from individuals and organizations; however, in actuality, Bill 19 was developed behind closed doors (Leslie 1991). The presidents of the BC Federation of Labour and the BCTF each had their first look at Bills 19 and 20 when they were introduced in the BC legislature, and Elsie McMurphy, president of the BCTF in 1987, complained that there had been no consultation with the BCTF, trustees, or the public ("Socreds' Mind-Set Ensuring Education Turmoil," *Times Colonist*, 14 May 1987). According to Assistant Deputy Minister of Education Jack Fleming, the government did not trust the BCTF; the school wars had gone on for too long, and the government was afraid to tip its hand in advance by putting the College of Teachers proposal out as a discussion topic (Bishop 1996).

Failure to consult teachers convinced many that the actions of the government were punitive (Tuinman and Brayne 1988), and, as a response, the BCTF fought for control. Teachers were the most vocal critics of Bill 20, which was largely supported by the trustees' and principals'

associations. Although amendments to Bill 20 followed four days of meetings between the BCTF and the Ministry of Education, on 28 April 1987, teachers throughout the province protested with a one-day “study session,” called an illegal strike by the BCSTA, the attorney-general, and other government officials. Vander Zalm and members of his cabinet were bewildered that teachers were threatening to strike over legislation giving them the right to strike (“Political Climate Foggy for Premier,” *Times Colonist*, 11 April 1987), while the NDP opposition, which focused its critique on Bill 19, which threatened traditional labour, did not support teachers’ job action, with some citing “significant amendments” proposed by the minister, and others, such as MLA Dave Stupich, fearing that teacher withdrawal of services alienated parents and made enemies both inside and outside the BCTF (“Education War Taking Its Toll, But Talks Offer Signs of Peace,” *Times Colonist*, 28 April 1987). Widespread labour discontent with both bills led to a province-wide strike on 1 June 1987, in which approximately one-third of British Columbia’s working people participated. In the end, the most significant concession the BCTF was able to garner was that, in the event of a conflict, Bill 20 provisions would take precedence over Bill 19. Bills 19 and 20 became law on 1 July 1987.

Ironically, although Bill 20 was intended to curb the power of the BCTF, the *Teaching Profession Act* caused teachers to rally around their union leadership more militantly and gave the BCTF a much stronger voice. Although many government objectives were addressed by Brummet’s new legislation, Vander Zalm’s hopes for a weakened union were dashed as the new legislation had the entirely opposite effect, consolidating the power of the BCTF, putting accreditation power in the hands of the BCCT, and swinging public sympathy toward teachers.

## DISCUSSION

Jack Heinrich, minister of education during the “School Wars” of the 1980s, summed up the Social Credit education agenda when he said that all he wanted to control as minister was “finance, curricula, examinations and the certification of teachers” (Bowman 1990, 8).

Despite prolonged, organized, and heated opposition to legislation that restrained the power of teachers in the classroom and the workplace, and restricted the fiscal authority of school boards, his government generally managed to centralize control over education within the ministry.

Though the School Wars united the BCTF and the BCSTA against the government, with school board revolts, a teachers’ strike masquerading

as a “study session,” a second strike that threatened to become a general strike across the provincial workforce, and another that did, government exercised its power over school district budgets, accountability measures and employee relations, and even had its way regarding detailed curricular matters.

Fiscal conservatism may have been the premise underlying initiatives such as revising the school tax structure and increased privatization and cutbacks across the public service, with thousands of jobs lost or transferred to the private sector and thousands of teacher and school support positions in the province eliminated, but the influence of neoliberal interest and business groups may have been an additional factor in relation to government decisions regarding independent school funding, creating the basis for an entrepreneurial approach to international education, making school curricula fit business needs, and fostering a management “class” at the school level. Ironically, the College of Teachers, which on the surface conformed to the neoliberal privatization philosophy of the day, was the only initiative that had the opposite effect, centralizing accreditation power in the hands of the BCTF.

Tony Brummet, minister of education in 1988 when the first round of full collective bargaining saw striking teachers eventually conclude an agreement for class size limits, paid preparation time and maternity leave, tenure rights, professional autonomy clauses, and significant salary increases, summed up the relationship between teachers and the government during the 1980s as one of “mutual hostility,” and indicated that conflict had become a way of life in BC educational politics (Bedard 1992). His reflections on that period of upheaval seem to have been prophetic as well, at least for periods of neoliberal governance in the province.

When the NDP formed the provincial government in 1991, there was a decade of relative quiet: negotiations achieved reductions in class size for most classes at the K-3 level, fixed ratios for learning specialist teachers, librarians, counsellors, learning assistance teachers, special education teachers, and ESL teachers, as well as improvements for teachers on call. Many of these gains were lost when the BC Liberals took power in 2001.

Successive neoliberal governments led by Gordon Campbell and then Christy Clark implemented multiple school closures and further restrictions on school board finance and control resulting in the loss of jobs and school services, and the battles resumed: teachers mounted a province-wide political protest in 2002, a ten-day strike in 2005 when government brought in legislation to impose an agreement, and a three-

day strike in 2012 as part of pressure for a negotiated settlement (BCTF 2016).

Budget cuts in 2015 reduced the provincial school district share by \$29 million, resulting in more school closures (bringing the total to 250), as well as fewer education assistants, cuts to specialist teachers, and reduced school bus service. A further 25 million education dollars were cut from the 2016 budget. However, forced to back down after months of pressure from school districts, teachers, parents, and the public (and amid calls from the BCTF to reduce or eliminate private school funding, which had hit an all-time high of \$358 million in 2015), in May 2016, the government “returned” \$25 million to provincial school districts (“BC Kicking in \$25 Million to Aid School Budget Shortfalls,” *Vancouver Sun*, 1 June 2016): a “School War” averted?

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