

A Little Tempest: Public Reaction to the Formation of a Large Educational Unit in the Peace River District of British Columbia

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The establishment of a large educational unit in the Peace River District in the 1930's, the first of its kind in British Columbia, originally was violently opposed by local taxpayers but generally approved by local teachers. The establishment of the unit may be divided into two phases: the first, in which thirty-seven school districts were united, began in October 1934, and the second, in which practically the whole region was included, began one year later.

In July 1934 fifty-four of the sixty school of the huge, isolated, and sparsely settled Peace River District were managed by locally elected school boards.¹ The other six schools were under the official trusteeship of M. S. Morell, the government agent at Pouce Coupe.² In September the school inspector, W. A. Plenderleith, informed the Provincial Superintendent of Education, S. J. Willis, that in forty-four selected districts only five had fully qualified boards.³ In the remaining districts at least two of the three trustees were delinquent in paying taxes. Plenderleith suggested that the thirty-nine districts be united into a single unit under an official trustee.

Willis enthusiastically approved the plan but recommended that the thirty-nine districts be divided into several experimental groups "each containing seven or eight schools."⁴ In October four large districts were

¹ The area is approximately seventy-two hundred square miles. The settled area served by schools in 1934 was sixty-one hundred square miles. British Columbia, *Report of the Public Schools of British Columbia, 1936* (Victoria, King's Printer, 1936), H60. Cited hereafter as *Report of Public Schools*, with date. The district is separated from the rest of British Columbia by the Rocky Mountains. In the thirties there was no direct rail or road connection between the two parts of the province. The 1931 census gave the population as 6685. Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931, Volume 2* (Ottawa, King's Printer, 1936), 106.

² S. J. Willis to M. S. Morell, July 5, 1934, Correspondence of Official Trustee, Archives of South Peace River School District, hereafter cited as ASPRSD.

³ *Report of Public Schools, 1936*, H59.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1935, S28; *ibid.*, 1936, H59.

established and placed under Morell's official trusteeship.⁵ As the four districts were administered as a unit except that each had a different mill rate, reference will be made below to the large unit rather than to the four large units.

Morell wrote to each school board secretary explaining the plan and asking him to assume the advisory position of "correspondent."⁶ Then on October 26 Plenderleith and Morell spoke to the teachers assembled at Dawson Creek for the first convention of the South Peace Teachers' Association.⁷ Plenderleith explained that the scheme had been recommended by the British Columbia School Trustees' Association (B.C.S.T.A.) at Nelson earlier that year and that ratepayers would still be able to vote at annual meetings on all school matters. He added that as the Department of Education paid approximately eighty-five per cent of teachers' salaries, the power of appointment, transfer, and dismissal of teachers would be held solely by the Department.

Plenderleith's reference to the decision of the Trustees' Association is misleading. The convention had recommended larger units of administration in some cases but had not recommended the abolition of school boards.⁸ The reference to school meetings also requires clarification; such meetings would in future only be able to offer advice to the official trustee. The large share of the teachers' salaries paid by the government, which was used many times to justify centralized control, does not reveal accurately the allocation of the financial burden. In 1933, for example, the government paid sixty-three per cent of the total school costs in the Peace River District.⁹

Morell told the teachers that the large unit was not "a new departure on the part of the Department of Education"; other official trusteeships had worked so well that they were "being extended." Like Plenderleith, Morell mentioned the school trustees' resolution favouring a reduction in the number of school districts. He stated that replies had already been

⁵ British Columbia, *British Columbia Gazette*, October 5, 1934 and October 25, 1934; Willis to Morell, October 9, 1934 and October 26, 1934, Correspondence of Official Trustee, ASPRSD. The four districts were called: South Peace, North Peace, Central Peace, and East Peace.

⁶ Morell to C. E. Tomlinson, former secretary of Crystal Spring School, October 18, 1934, *ibid.*

⁷ *Peace River Block News*, November 2, 1934.

⁸ *Reports of the Proceedings of the Thirtieth Convention of the British Columbia School Trustees' Association*, n.p., n.d., held at Nelson, September 17, 18, 19, 1934, 62. Cited hereafter as *Reports of Proceedings*, with the place and dates of the convention.

⁹ *Peace River Block News*, November 26, 1936.

received from fifty per cent of the former boards assuring co-operation. The official trustee, Morell continued, must have the final say in expenditures. He referred to the dissatisfaction of teachers, specifically mentioning disparities in salaries in contiguous districts, and resentment caused by the extent of the school boards' power, which he implied had been disproportionate to their small financial contribution. He stated that eventually the entire Peace River District would have a common assessment.

Morell's denial that the plan was not a "new departure" is questionable. It is true that there had been official trusteeships for many years but they were now being used to bring something new into existence, that is, the large unit. Moreover, even if thirty-nine individual trusteeships had been established simultaneously, it is likely that there would have been opposition. Furthermore, as Morell himself intimated, the plan was being introduced with a view to incorporating all the small school districts in the region in the new scheme whether their trustees were qualified or not.

The next day, following the reading of a letter concerning large units, from Harry Charlesworth, general secretary of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (B.C.T.F.), the teachers passed the following resolution:

Be it resolved that this Convention approve the plan for a large administrative unit for education in the Peace River Block, and that we as teachers support the movement toward the inclusion of all within the Inspectorate of the Peace River District of British Columbia.¹⁰

Several residents wrote letters to department officials objecting to the change. A. M. Petch of Valley View asked Morell why control had been taken out of the people's hands.¹¹ J. P. Henderson, of the defunct South Dawson School District, protested to Willis concerning the "arbitrary method" by which the scheme had been "foisted" upon the people. Henderson objected most of all to being asked to act as correspondent, a position which he regarded as that of "unofficial informer." If he accepted the position, he said, he would be popularly regarded as a "stool pigeon to an official bureaucracy at Pouce Coupe."¹² In several districts there was an unwillingness of former trustees to act as correspondents. Sometimes other residents were appointed as correspondents, and at a few schools where no one accepted the position the teachers acted in that

¹⁰ Minutes of the South Peace River Teachers' Convention, October 27, 1934, Correspondence of Official Trustee, ASPRSD.

¹¹ A. M. Petch to Morell, October 25, 1934, *ibid.*

¹² J. P. Henderson to Willis, October 27, 1934, *ibid.*

capacity. H. G. Hadland, secretary of Baldonnel School District, which was still independent, asked Minister of Education George Weir, in T. D. Pattullo's Liberal government, that his district be allowed to vote on the large unit before being absorbed.¹³ He pointed out that Baldonnel had had "no trouble or disputes."

The *Peace River Block News* commented editorially on the large unit.¹⁴ It considered the greatest advantages would be a common mill rate and more incentive for teachers. It foresaw that there would be better retention of teachers. The *News* added that as new buildings would be necessary under the scheme, expenses would increase. Its strongest criticism was that as ratepayers would in future have "no say" in school affairs, local interest in schools would decline.

Several letters objecting to the large unit were published in the *Peace River Block News*. Mrs. Charles Mixer, a trustee of the dissolved North Dawson School District, in an "open letter" to Morell, pointed out that trustees had worked for nothing.¹⁵ She called the scheme "fascistic" and compared it with developments in Mussolini's Italy. "You just used high pressure salesmanship," she accused Morell, "and gave it to the teachers to take to the people. You are clever, you and your able assistant, the school inspector." She wondered who had recommended the plan, the trustees or Plenderleith. In conclusion Mrs. Mixer dismissed the large unit as a "lot of baloney."

J. P. Henderson and A. Lundin reiterated Mrs. Mixer's charge of fascism.¹⁶ They said that the notice to secretaries dated October 18, nine days after the scheme had been put into effect,¹⁷ did not give any reasons for abolishing the small boards. The former secretaries, they said, were to play the role of "local handymen and informers." They referred to the Nelson convention of school trustees as "the convention in the South" at which Peace River trustees had had no representation. Laws should be made by the legislative branch of government, they said. As for the argument that the provincial government was paying the major share of the cost of education, they felt sure that the rural ratepayer was paying indirectly. The inspector did not know the needs of each district, they averred, and quoted Aristotle as asking, "Which is the better judge of the

¹³ H. G. Hadland to G. M. Weir, November 12, 1934, *ibid.*

¹⁴ *Peace River Block News*, November 2, 1934.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, November 16, 1934.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, November 24, 1934.

¹⁷ Actually the notice was sent thirteen days after the creation of three of the larger districts. *Vide supra.*

merits of a house, the expert carpenter who may build it, or the man who expects to use it and for whom it is built?" Henderson and Lundin also considered the scheme unfair, as rural schools but not "town schools" were forced to come in. The "town schools" referred to were Fort St. John, Dawson Creek, Rolla, and Pouce Coupe. At this stage in the development of the large unit, this argument was not applicable; the only rural districts that had been absorbed into large units were those which had been unable to elect qualified trustees.

J. M. Hyndman of the dissolved North Dawson School District stated that all work in that district had been done by contract.¹⁸ Hyndman was particularly proud that wood had been obtained at between \$1.70 and \$1.75 a cord. Peter M. Hyndman, also of North Dawson School District, denied that the school trustees ever brought forth a resolution favouring large units.¹⁹ He charged that Plenderleith did not inspect schools enough, and wanted Weir to be asked to return Plenderleith "from whence he came." The editor commented in the December 14 issue that he had decided "to close the matter" of the large unit.²⁰

A petition bearing three hundred and eighty-one signatures was sent to the Government of British Columbia.²¹ The petition described the large unit as "arbitrary," "despotic," "coercive," "scandalously un-British," and "undemocratic." It demanded that the "Public Schools of the District be restored to the elected school boards of the people." After studying the petition, Plenderleith reported that 17 per cent of the signatories lived outside the unit, that two hundred and seventy-three of them were at least one year delinquent in their tax payments, and that fifty-three others were not on the voters' list.²² Plenderleith's attitude toward the critics is revealed in his doctoral dissertation: "There was a great amount of opposition from those who had been squandering the local school funds." "These critics usually carry on their campaign by spreading false rumours regarding some phase of the administration of the unit."²³

In January 1935 an executive meeting of the Peace River District Liberal Association at Dawson Creek opposed the large unit.²⁴ W. A.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, November 30, 1934.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, December 14, 1934.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Plenderleith, W. A., "An Experiment in the Reorganization and Administration of a Rural Inspectoral Unit in British Columbia" (unpublished Doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1937), Appendix, 35-6.

²² *Ibid.*, Appendix, 37.

²³ *Ibid.*, 63, 151.

²⁴ *Peace River Block News*, January 25, 1935.

Watson, unsuccessful Liberal candidate in the 1933 provincial election, declared that the scheme was "a breach of British justice."

In February a meeting in Pouce Coupe, after hearing a speech by Plenderleith, voted fifty-two to sixteen for inclusion in the large unit.²⁵ In March Willis named Morell official trustee of Pouce Coupe.²⁶

In May a public meeting in Fort St. John opposed joining the large unit by a vote of twenty-eight to eight.²⁷ Alwin Holland, who had taught school in the Peace River District for many years and who was present at the meeting, believed that ratepayers were afraid that they might "lose their sense of identity."²⁸ He believed that the official trustee should continue to control the teaching staff but that an elected board should manage buildings and grounds.

Meetings held at Kelly Lake and Sunset Prairie favoured joining the large unit.²⁹

In February and March the controversy concerning the large unit resumed in the *Peace River Block News*. A very critical editorial in the February 15 issue asked why Vancouver and Victoria continued to elect trustees if the whole scheme of local elections was "antiquated."³⁰ The following week the *News* announced that it was reopening its columns to correspondents on the school administration question because of receipt of the first letter supporting the scheme.³¹ The editor mentioned that he had not heard of anyone else being in favour.

The letter from "An Old Trustee, Pouce Coupe," stated that the more cautious element of the community was "averse to breaking into print."³² The letter favoured the equalizing of taxation burden, mentioning that Hanshaw [Upper Cutbank] district had a mill rate of twenty before its dissolution. The letter pointed out that Vancouver with seven trustees for three hundred and twenty-five thousand people could hardly be compared with the school districts of the Peace. The "Old Trustee" said that advisory boards were a "proven and accepted adjunct to all big business and government." School meetings in the past, he said, had been abused by local politicians, had degenerated into open fights, and has "encour-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, February 15, 1935.

²⁶ Willis to Morell, March 29, 1935, Correspondence of Official Trustee, ASPRSD.

²⁷ R. J. Ogilvie, secretary of Fort St. John District, to Plenderleith, May 11, 1935, *ibid.*

²⁸ Alwin Holland to Plenderleith, May 11, 1935, *ibid.*

²⁹ Plenderleith to Weir, July 29, 1935, *ibid.*

³⁰ *Peace River Block News*, February 15, 1935.

³¹ *Ibid.*, February 22, 1935.

³² *Ibid.*

aged sectionalism and sectarianism." He accused the editor of the *Peace River Block News* of bowing to public opinion.

Peter Hyndman stated that the board system had been started by Gladstone, Peel, Melbourne, Lord John Russell, Palmerston, and Disraeli.³³ Referring to Pouce Coupe's high mill rate, he said that the district's motto was, "Take my yoke upon thee." J. P. Henderson of Dawson Creek claimed that the Department of Public Works was not operated well and should not be emulated.³⁴ James H. Clark later revealed himself as the "Old Trustee."³⁵ He conceded that North Dawson and Saskatoon Creek Districts had been well managed, but stated that they were "almost isolated in their position for careful and economical administration."

Education Minister Weir was sufficiently alarmed by the protests in the Peace River to write to Plenderleith, who had replaced Morell as official trustee in April, asking for a special report.³⁶ Weir was particularly interested in knowing if the negative reaction would lose the Liberals votes in the next provincial election. Plenderleith replied that according to "general opinion," the C.C.F. party would get the most votes in the next election. Plenderleith himself was confident, however, that many people who had voted C.C.F. in the last election would vote Liberal because of the "greater equality" that had been achieved under reorganization.

Plenderleith said that there had been opposition at first because of lack of understanding, but explanations at public meetings and the efficiency of the scheme, had changed the attitude of many people. He announced that a plan for a large unit to embrace the entire area had been submitted to the Department of Education, but in accordance with the wishes of T. F. Turgeon, Liberal candidate in the forthcoming federal election, action upon it was being delayed so as not to affect adversely Turgeon's support. To Weir's suggestion that Plenderleith should accept a transfer to another part of the province, Plenderleith replied that this would create difficulties for his successor and result in a loss of prestige for the Department of Education and for his successor.

Two delegates to the 1935 convention of the B.C.S.T.A. referred to the reorganization in the Peace River. They did not criticize the change but

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, March 1, 1935.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, March 22, 1935.

³⁶ Plenderleith referred to the minister's request in his letter to the minister. Plenderleith to Weir, July 29, 1935, Correspondence of Official Trustee, ASPRSD. Plenderleith had been made official trustee following a strong recommendation by H. B. King, technical advisor to the Commission on School Finance. H. B. King, *School Finance in British Columbia* (Victoria, King's Printer, 1935), 114.

argued that it should not extend to the rest of the province. H. P. Coombes said that the conditions in the Peace River and "in more populous areas [were] in no way analogous."³⁷ In the Peace River District, he said, there were not suitable people available to act as trustees. H. Manning said that the Peace River was a pioneer area lacking in finances.³⁸ No trustees from the Peace River attended the convention.

In October 1935 the Council of Public Instruction formed the Peace River Rural School District, to include all of the former Peace River school districts except Fort St. John, Dawson Creek, and Rolla.³⁹ Plenderleith sent a form letter to each of the secretaries of the dissolved districts informing them of the formation of the large unit.⁴⁰

The main opposition to this extension came from the region north of the Peace River, where the number of schools included was raised from six to eighteen. According to Plenderleith, the "... opposition was organized by a secretary who disliked the idea of losing his annual honorarium, and by his brother who thought he would lose his monopoly of boarding the teacher."⁴¹

In July, anticipating the change, H. G. Hadland of Baldonnel, who had opposed the large unit the previous year, informed Weir that local interest would be "killed" if the plan was executed.⁴² On November 3 he informed Plenderleith that his greatest objection was to the "high-handed" manner of effecting the change.⁴³ A meeting of ratepayers from Baldonnel, Peace View, and Taylor Flats was held at Baldonnel on November 9.⁴⁴ Hadland explained that he had called the meeting "to let the Department [of Education] know how strongly [the ratepayers] were opposed to the so-called 'new deal.'" After A. R. Hadland had been elected chairman, he complained that the ratepayers' wishes had "been absolutely ignored." He added, "Our stand should be: 'No representation, no taxation.'" The meeting passed motions asking the Minister of Education to send a representative to explain the reasons for the change, threatening to keep their children home from school after the Christmas

³⁷ *Reports of Proceedings*, Harrison Hot Springs, September 16, 17, 18, 19, 1935, 29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁹ *Report of Public Schools, 1936*, H60.

⁴⁰ Plenderleith to J. A. Powell, former secretary of Charlie Lake School District, October 22, 1935, Correspondence of Official Trustee, ASPRSD.

⁴¹ Plenderleith, 79.

⁴² H. G. Hadland to Weir, July 29, 1935, Correspondence of Official Trustee, ASPRSD.

⁴³ Hadland to Plenderleith, November 3, 1935, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ The minutes of the meeting appear in Plenderleith, Appendix 40.

vacation, and demanding Plenderleith's dismissal. Copies of the meeting's minutes were sent to newspapers in both British Columbia and Alberta.

Following a news report of the meeting in *The Vancouver Province*, a correspondent defended the large unit in free verse:

...
 but they tried that PLAN
 up in the PEACE
 and they didn't raise the TAXES
 but they paid all their DEBTS
 and gave the kids a free DOCTOR
 and nurses and a DENTIST
 and at the end of the YEAR
 they had money in the BANK
 and I wish they would do THAT
 for my KIDS.⁴⁵

A. R. Hadland's report on the meeting to the *Peace River Block News* contained additional complaints: When asked by a reporter from *The Edmonton Journal*, "You are then a dictator?" Plenderleith was reported as having replied: "Virtually, yes." Dr. Plenderleith had "not fulfilled his duty, as inspector of schools, inasmuch as he had not inspected the children's work. . . ." ⁴⁶ Reports of the threatened "strike" were broadcast by radio stations throughout the province. ⁴⁷

One of Plenderleith's tactics in retaliating against such attacks was to encourage teachers to write letters to Weir and Willis commending the change. ⁴⁸ In letters to Weir and Willis, Nancy Craig, teacher at Riverside, said that the new scheme had resulted in a barn, better educational aids, and medical and dental services for her school. ⁴⁹ Another teacher wrote: "As far as we teachers are concerned, the larger school system offers us a new lease of life — a new freedom from local tyranny and a new objective. The very air here is alive with a new spirit of endeavour and service." ⁵⁰ R. A. Cheeseman, teacher at Pine View, informed Plenderleith that he had written to Willis and Weir "along the lines sug-

⁴⁵ *The Vancouver Province*, January 10, 1936.

⁴⁶ *Peace River Block News*, November 22, 1935.

⁴⁷ Plenderleith, 80.

⁴⁸ According to Jean Gething, who taught in the Peace River in the thirties, Plenderleith sent a form letter to all teachers requesting them to write letters, and asked teachers later if they had written. Interview with Jean Gething, July 23, 1970.

⁴⁹ Nancy Craig to Plenderleith, January 14, 1936, Correspondence of Official Trustee, ASPRSD.

⁵⁰ Plenderleith, 83.

gested” and said that he was encouraging others to write also.⁵¹ He had written a letter for J. Labancon, but preferred “their own handwriting.” He added that he had asked people “to include disapproval of the Baldonnel attack” in their letters.

The turning-point in the long struggle between officials and Peace River residents came on November 29 with the printing of a “Public Apology to the Department of Education” on the front page of the *Peace River Block News*.⁵² The news report of the Baldonnel meeting was “entirely misleading,” the editorial stated. It was not true that the school boards had been treated with contempt, they had each been sent a letter. Plenderleith’s admission that he was a dictator was taken from its context. The *News* reported Plenderleith’s full answer as follows:

If you consider the District Engineer to be a dictator since he has control over his unit of administration, or if you consider the Government Agent to be a dictator since he has complete control over his unit of administration, and since all these men are carrying out the direct instructions of the people’s elected representatives (the Ministers of the Cabinet), then the new system would fall into the same category.

Weir asked Plenderleith to attend the second Baldonnel meeting which was held on the afternoon of December 14.⁵³ In spite of the sub-zero temperature, ratepayers came from Cecil Lake, Taylor Flats, Erinlea, Transpine, and North Pine.⁵⁴ In all, approximately two hundred people were present.⁵⁵ Plenderleith told the assembled ratepayers that he expected the legislature at the next session to provide “some form of [school] board.” He stated that improvements in education in the past had depended upon local interest, initiative, and resources, and the result had been a lack of uniformity in services and administration. He outlined specific benefits that the scheme would bring to the schools north of the Peace River. A motion was made from the floor assuring the Department of Education of the meeting’s “fullest co-operation.” Only those who had been present at the previous meeting were allowed to vote, and the motion passed thirty-seven to fourteen.

H. G. Hadland informed Weir that those present had been unanimous

⁵¹ R. A. Cheeseman to Plenderleith, December 7, 1935, Correspondence of Official Trustee, ASPRSD.

⁵² *Peace River Block News*, November 29, 1935.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, December 20, 1935; Plenderleith, 81.

⁵⁴ Interview with Plenderleith, June 15, 1970.

⁵⁵ *Peace River Block News*, January 3, 1936.

in thanking Weir for sending Plenderleith to speak to them.⁵⁶ He said that there would be no further resistance to the large unit if a school board were provided.

An editorial in the January 1936 issue of *The B.C. Teacher* described the reorganization in the Peace River District as a "courageous experiment" and the publicity following the first Baldonnel meeting as the "terrifying reverberation of a tempest in a teapot."⁵⁷ Articles by teachers in the Peace River praising the experiment appeared in *The B.C. Teacher* during the 1935-36 school year. Plenderleith had encouraged teachers to contribute articles.⁵⁸

Laurence MacRae, who had been principal at Pouce Coupe until leaving the district in June 1935, stated that "... since the formation of the large unit friction for the teacher [was] practically a thing of the past and he [found] himself no longer the victim of the whims of a local oligarchy."⁵⁹ MacRae said that provision for large administrative units was "the Magna Carta of the rural school teacher." C. Dudley Gaitskill, principal at Dawson Creek, reported great enthusiasm among the teachers.⁶⁰ "No longer are they at the beck and call of untrained masters. . . ." He said that schools were now well-equipped, maintained, and heated, and that teachers chose their own boarding places.

Both of these articles tended to exaggerate the teachers' new-found freedom. An examination of the official trustee's correspondence reveals that friction was by no means "practically a thing of the past." Concerning boarding, Plenderleith in 1936 advised Miss M. Anderson, newly appointed teacher at North Dawson, not to take a boarding place until she had seen the local correspondent.⁶¹

Everett F. Hurt, principal at Rolla, J. E. Jean, teacher at Doe River, and Charles D. Ovans, principal at Pouce Coupe, commented favourably on the large unit.⁶² Jack Chatfield, teacher at Parkland, said that a good

⁵⁶ H. G. Hadland to Weir, December 6, 1935, Correspondence of Official Trustee, ASPRSD.

⁵⁷ *The B.C. Teacher*, XV, 5, January 1936, 3.

⁵⁸ Interview with Plenderleith.

⁵⁹ L. P. MacRae, "A Plea for Larger Administrative Units—A Rural Teacher Reports His Experiences and Observations," *The B.C. Teacher*, XV, 4, December 1935, 13-17.

⁶⁰ C. D. Gaitskill, "The Larger Unit of Administration and Its Application to Town Schools," *ibid.*, XV, 5, January 1936, 20-22.

⁶¹ Plenderleith to M. Anderson, August 18, 1936, Correspondence of Official Trustee, ASPRSD.

⁶² E. F. Hurt and J. E. Lean, "Development of Education in the Peace River District," *The B.C. Teacher*, XV, 6, February 1936, 15-16.

adult education program was possible in the Peace River because the cost was carried by the whole unit.⁶³

The first critical comment in *The B.C. Teacher* came from B. B. Thorsteinsson.⁶⁴ He said that as conditions in the Peace River had not been good, teachers there had welcomed centralization, but wondered if centralization would benefit areas where conditions were better.

Peter Hyndman, a former Peace River trustee, sent a message to the 1936 B.C.S.T.A. Convention stating that although he was "... very strongly apposed to [the system] of inauguration from every viewpoint, generally speaking, the improvement [was] wonderfully beneficial."⁶⁵

Legislation passed at the 1936 session of the British Columbia legislature defined districts such as Peace River as "administrative educational areas."⁶⁶ No provision was made for an elected school board, but a local vote on the reorganization was made mandatory. Apparently fearing the result of such a vote in the Peace River, the Department of Education delayed it until June 1937.⁶⁷ Such fears proved groundless as the measure passed with three hundred and forty-two in favour and one hundred and nine opposed. The choice was between the retention of the large unit in its existing form and a return to the old small units. There was no provision for units intermediate in size or for a large unit controlled by an elected school board.

Most of the complaints made regarding the large unit in the Peace River concerned the abolition of school boards. There are several reasons for the extent of the opposition. First, the Peace River school districts had been largely shielded from the economic stresses of the depression by the government's generosity; the government had paid the greater part of school costs. Thus local residents could see little financial benefit in reorganization. Second, as Paul Sharp has shown, there was a tendency for many farmers in western Canada to want to keep government as close to home as possible.⁶⁸ This was especially so in the Peace River where isola-

⁶³ J. Chatfield, "Adult Education in the Peace River Block," *ibid.*, XV, 8, April 1936, 17.

⁶⁴ B. B. Thorsteinsson, "Some Thoughts on Centralization," *ibid.*, XV, 9, May 1936, 27-9.

⁶⁵ *Reports of Proceedings, Penticton*, September 21, 22, 23, 1936, 43.

⁶⁶ *Statutes of British Columbia*, c.55, s.3, 24, 25, (1936).

⁶⁷ Voting did not begin until six days after the provincial election. *Peace River Block News*, July 2, 1937.

⁶⁸ P. F. Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada* (Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 1948). Direct democracy was popular, the initiative, the recall, and the postcard referendum were all favoured by farmers' political organization.

tion caused suspicion of the rest of British Columbia and especially of the "coast cities" of Vancouver and Victoria.⁶⁹ Third, the multiplicity of districts gave many people a vested interest in the small unit system. Fourth, the Peace River had only one institution of self-government, the school board. Jean Gething, who taught school in the Peace River for forty years, said, "When school boards were abolished, the people felt that everything was being taken away from them."⁷⁰

It is difficult not to sympathize with a second local complaint, namely, the manner in which the large unit was introduced. It would surely have been more diplomatic to call trustees together at a series of regional meetings to explain the plan than merely to send a form letter to the school board secretaries.

Local teachers favoured reorganization because it brought greater efficiency and gave them more security. They preferred having decisions concerning appointments and dismissals made by the school inspector rather than by trustees.

The government apparently appreciated the efficiency and economy of the large unit, but feared its political consequences.⁷¹ The violence of the local opposition in the Peace River was undoubtedly a factor in the government's decision not to extend the centralized scheme to the rest of the province.

Reorganization in the Peace River received scant attention west of the Rockies. Those who did comment on it seemed to consider it a success, but to say that because the Peace River was such an isolated and depressed region, what had occurred there did not apply to them.

Why did the people of the Peace River vote in favour of the large unit in 1937 after attacking it so vigorously in 1934 and 1935? The writer received two answers when interviewing people who had lived there in the thirties: one that residents had learned in the interim of the superiority of the large unit, the other that they had become used to it. The first answer seems more reasonable, but it is interesting to speculate as to how

The desire to keep government close to home probably accounts in part for the farmers' distrust of centrally controlled parties.

⁶⁹ In many ways, the people felt more closely allied with Alberta than with the rest of British Columbia. Even the teachers grew suspicious of the land beyond the Rockies. Oscar Palsson, a teacher in the Peace River in the thirties, said: "Our only contact we had with Victoria was that we got our pay cheques from there, and we felt that they were sent grudgingly." Interview with Oscar Palsson, June 20, 1970.

⁷⁰ Interview with Jean Gething.

⁷¹ Plenderleith claimed that educational costs had been cut by more than \$12,000 between 1934-1935 and 1935-1936. *Report of Public Schools, 1936*, H63-H65.

residents would have voted if they had been given a choice of having an elected school board.

An even more disturbing question arises when we consider that the vote cast was only thirteen per cent of that in the provincial election held in the same month.⁷² Perhaps the majority of people in the Peace River did not care very much who controlled their schools.

⁷² Of course, fewer people were eligible to vote in school affairs than in the provincial election. Using figures given by Plenderleith, it is estimated that there were approximately 3450 eligible voters in 1934. Plenderleith, Appendix 37. If the number was the same in 1937, the percentage of eligible voters casting ballots in that year was 13.