

ROOTLESS IN THEIR SOULS

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It is hard to imagine a better description of our current situation in Manitoba public education than that provided by Tom Green (1984 – a coincidence?) in *The Formation of Conscience in an Age of Technology*. "... our institutions must also be sufficiently resistant to change so that those whose conscience is merely technical and limited to skills of managing the political apparatus, but who are rootless in their souls, may not do irreparable harm." In short, people focussed on carrying out the *how to* miss the *why* and the *what*.

Simply put, Bill 64 leaves public schools in the hands of people who have no knowledge about, or investment in, why we created them in the first place. People who are more adept at sponsoring the mechanisms of this government than at upholding an educational agenda. They do not seem to understand or care about the havoc they are creating and enabling.

Politicians, both rural and urban, are abandoning their constituencies. Their civil servants, selected on the basis of their management skills (technical conscience) and not their knowledge of education, keep check on their partisan politician bosses to ensure that they do not deviate from the prevailing script predetermined by the Premier and the Minister. And they are only willing to work with those who endorse their strategies. Together, they are on the verge of doing irreparable damage to the very roots that provide them with their current legitimacy and which they took an oath to defend and uphold.

It is an undisputed fact that extreme provincial controls undermine local institutions and local rights. In schools, this means closing "inefficient" schools – schools with enriched staffing to meet local needs which provide some semblance of equal educational opportunity. It means longer bus rides even for very young children, itself an equality issue. Bill 64 eliminates the moratorium on school closures and the mandate to keep one-way bus rides under an hour.

Bill 64 inevitably ends up with fewer teachers in rural communities, where they are often so much more than teachers, providing a host of other leadership functions. It means fewer people such as those in schools and board offices having gainful local employment.

Control from urban centres means that rural values, solutions, and resource allocations lose their sway in public policies – removing locally elected trustees means that the rural roots just dry up faster.

By sheer numbers and efficiencies of scale, urban frameworks and prescriptions hold out no promise for local responses and initiatives. But singular, simple answers to multi-layered, complex problems also do not work in urban areas.

Winnipeg is a cosmopolitan city with very diverse neighbourhoods, a fact that most of us are very proud of. Our city council, to their credit, have not given up on making our city an inviting, affirming community for its original inhabitants and newcomers. However, making it all one jurisdiction for educational purposes is bound to make its efforts more challenging.

As Maggie MacIntosh, Winnipeg Free Press education reporter, has repeatedly revealed, each school division has tailored very unique services to the needs of their diverse populations. It is hard to imagine that level of sophistication and responsiveness in a solitary system *under the management of one director* whose first responsibility is to the provincial government.

Decisions that have a great impact on the everyday lives of citizens ought to be made as close to these citizens as possible. Furthermore, these citizens ought to have relatively easy access to the decision makers and the processes of decision making that affect them so directly. I fear the alienation and senses of apathy, resentment and resignation that so often accompany shifts of power to higher and higher levels of a system of governance.

As power and authority shift to the upper levels of a system, those who occupy the lower levels often feel much less of a stake in the enterprise. This loss of ownership breeds a disinterest in the affairs of governing and, quite often, an unwillingness to take responsibility for the consequences of decision making.

Green concludes with "... Rootedness and vision ultimately [are] what [provide] both the only salvation there is of those institutions and the only fixed point for the guidance of persons engaged in public policy."

Bill 64 tears away at the moral, social, economic and political *Rootedness* that defines Manitoba, and our present government, in its soulless and rootless agenda, is threatening the souls of all of us!