Presentation given by Dr. Sally Ross at Government House on February 27, 2018

The History of Acadian Schools in Nova Scotia: Challenges and Victories

Unlike many people in this room, including his Honour, I did not attend public schools in an Acadian village in Nova Scotia. My research on Acadian schools began in 1981 when one of my students (namely Barbara LeBlanc) chose to do a project on the battles that were tearing apart a number of Acadian communities in Nova Scotia. Without exaggerating, I think one could say that these battles did not come to an end until the year 2000, when Justice LeBlanc handed down his decision in the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia.

Based on the famous warning *Qui perd sa langue, perd la foi* (Who loses his language loses the faith), for a long time the French language was the guardian of Catholicism in French Canada. But who or what has guarded the French language in Nova Scotia where it has been in a minority situation for over 250 years? Schools have often been given that mission.

The history of Acadian schools in this province is a story about attitudes towards the French-speaking minority, attitudes about French as a language of instruction, and the aspirations of the Acadians themselves.

The story begins with exclusion based on religion. Our first legislative assembly was elected in 1758 when Britain and France were still at war and when Acadians were still being deported from Nova Scotia. Lead by Governor Charles Lawrence, this so-called democratic assembly was composed of 19 white Protestant male property owners. One of the first things these men did was to establish the Church of England as the official religion and pass a law forcing all Roman Catholic priests to leave the colony. Subsequently they passed laws preventing Catholics from owning land and setting up schools. These laws were repealed in 1786, but the full political emancipation of Catholics did not take place until 1827.

Illiteracy was a fact of life for the vast majority of Acadians who were able to obtain land in Nova Scotia in the decades after the late 1760s. They had no educated elite and were not able to call upon educators from their motherland. In 1799, when the

first resident priest, Father Jean Mandé Sigogne arrived, 50 of the 70 heads-of-families in Sainte-Anne-du-Ruisseau were unable to sign their name.

Public schools only started appearing in the larger Acadian communities in the late 1820s. By that time the province was divided into school districts and school sections, and Justices of the Peace were the kingpins of government in the counties. Whether they were laymen or members of the clergy, school commissioners were always JPs. They were the men who approved teachers and appointed school trustees. In the early days, there were very few Acadian Justices of the Peace. Honoré Martel from Arichat, for example, was appointed Justice of the Peace in 1837 and was the first Acadian JP in Cape Breton. The absence of Acadian JPs meant that for a long time the Acadian minority had no voice in the administration of the schools in their district. There was, however, one exception. Thanks to the efforts of Father Sigogne, the township of Clare requested and was granted its own separate school district. That meant that all the members of the school commission were Acadians. Clare was the only region in the province where Acadians controlled the administration of their schools. Elsewhere, they were dominated by other ethnic groups – even in Richmond County where Acadians formed the majority.

The real boom in the construction of schools throughout the province took place as a result of the Education Act of 1864 – often called the Free School Act or the Tupper Law. However, despite the name, school was anything but free. Referring to the first school that was built in the late 1870s in his native village, the Acadian historian Neil Boucher writes:

> Money had been a problem in establishing a school on Surette's Island, and the lack of it continued to prevent students from receiving an education. If money was scarce within the family, all members had to work together to obtain what was necessary.

The Education Act of 1864, among other things, established the Council of Public Instruction which centralized the administration of schools, regulated the Normal School or Teachers College (founded in 1854), appointed school inspectors, issued teachers' licences, controlled the curriculum, and prescribed textbooks. Archbishop Connolly of Halifax refused to endorse Premier Tupper's system that was comprised entirely of lay schools. Since Catholics formed over a third of the population of the province, Tupper obviously wanted the support of the Church hierarchy. Archbishop Connolly eventually gave his support after Tupper promised that separate schools for Roman Catholics would continue to be allowed in Halifax, Sydney and Glace Bay,

and that there would be a fair representation of Catholics on the Council of Public Instruction. Private Catholic schools could become public providing the nuns or priests had the provincial teachers' qualifications.

There were two Acadian school inspectors appointed in the 19th century. The first one was Rémi Bénoît born in D'Escousse, on Isle Madame, and a graduate of Saint Francis Xavier. He served as inspector from 1869 to 1879 in Richmond County, a county where the Acadians formed the ethnic majority. He later founded the Société l'Assomption Mutuelle and became a very prominent figure in the Acadian nationalist movement. In his reports, Benoit laments the poor attendance, the poverty and the number of families emigrating to Massachussets.

The second inspector was Dr. Alexandre P. Landry who was born in New Brunswick and was a graduate of Harvard Medical School. He served as the inspector of schools in Clare from 1872 to 1877. His reports indicate that both French and English were being taught in the schools throughout Clare. Landry focuses on three issues: the teaching of French; proper training for Acadian teachers; and French-language textbooks. In his first report, Landry states that he was unable to find anyone in several of the school sections who was able to read. He stresses that in order to be effective, teachers in Clare must be able to teach equally well in English and in French. He makes it quite clear that teaching English should not be to the detriment of the French language.

As a result of petitions from Acadian school sections requesting that the government grant a bonus to teachers who could teach in French, a debate took place in the Legislative Assembly in 1879. Reading from the petition, Isidore LeBlanc, the MLA for Richmond County says:

> Our [children] generally labour under a most serious disadvantage arising out of the impossibility of employing teachers who are both able and willing to impart knowledge in the French language. A very large number of the youth of this and other counties, whose mother tongue is French, are thus doomed to the cruel alternative either of absolutely renouncing their right to a fair share in the blessings of a common school education or of having recourse to the proverbially difficult task of acquiring knowledge conveyed to them in a language with which they are utterly unacquainted.

The bonuses were not granted for another few years, but the records of the debate in the Legislative Assembly reflect the mentality of the English-speaking majority. The

following words of the Attorney General indicate that the aim of education for the Acadians was acculturation and assimilation:

> I have heard the criticism, particularly outside the House, that it would be unwise to encourage instruction in French, because it was desirable that the people should adopt universally not only English customs but the English language.

It is fair to say that this attitude was prevalent in Nova Scotia until at least the 1980s.

Under the pressure of the MLA Henri Robicheau, the government decided in 1885 to grant a bonus to French-speaking teachers with a Class B Licence. This probably explains why Acadians (primarily women) started attending the Normal School in larger numbers. Prior to that, relatively few Catholics and only a handful of Acadians had enrolled in that institution (founded in 1854) which was considered to be dominated by Baptists and Presbyterians. The government and the education authorities made it very clear that this bonus was designed to enable the teachers to help their Acadian pupils to learn English more easily, not to improve their literacy in French.

Well before the turn of the century, Evangeline, Longfellow's romantic heroine, had become a popular symbol of pride and a rallying point for Acadians everywhere. A growing sense of solidarity had brought together thousands of Acadians from all over the Maritimes at three so-called national conventions: in 1881 in Memramcook (NB); in 1884 in Miscouche (PEI); and in 1890 in Church Point (NS) to mark the founding of Collège Sainte-Anne by the Eudist Fathers. These were big events that included meetings for the delegates and a solemn high mass for the general public. They were well attended thanks to an efficient railway system. In addition to the solidarity and unity of the Acadian people, the delegates at the conventions discussed the importance of the preservation of the French language and the necessity of instruction in French in public schools. Their opinions were well publicized from the pulpits and in the Acadian newspapers.

From the point of view of the provincial authorities, instruction in French was tolerated in order to make sure that Acadian children learned English as quickly as possible. This was confirmed in 1902 by the Acadian Commission appointed by the government in order "to determine the best methods of teaching English in the French-speaking districts of the province." The Commission was composed of two Anglophones, three Francophone priests, and two Francophone MLAs. They made the following recommendations:

1. – that regular subjects be taught in French until Grade 3 or 4;
2. – that all subjects be taught in English from Grade 5 on;
3. – that a series of French readers be prepared for the first 4 grades;
4. – that a bilingual course for bilingual students be introduced at the Normal School (J-Alphonse Bénoît, who had been hired as a Physics teacher in 1900, was asked to teach a French class which he did, but only for a couple of years.);
5. – that an inspector for bilingual schools be hired (This was done, but not for another five years.);
6. – that bilingual teachers be hired for Acadian schools (In 1903, the religious congregation, the Filles de Jésus, arrived from France. Over the years, they recruited Acadian women and were to play a major role in several Acadian schools in Richmond County and Inverness County in Cape Breton. In 1948, they opened a consolidated school in Saulnierville and taught in several other villages in Clare and also in Wedgeport. They taught from 1903 to 1974 in Chéticamp – for a longer period than any where else in Nova Scotia. The Eudist Fathers were a Francophone congregation that taught at the high school level at the all-male Collège Sainte-Anne. The Sisters of Charity were very present in numerous Acadian villages, but they were an English-language congregation.).

Once the Commission's recommendations were implemented, they constituted minor victories, but they were more or less cancelled out by the system of compulsory provincial examinations at the end of Grade 11 and Grade 12 that lasted until 1972. The exams were in English, obviously putting the Acadian students at a disadvantage and doing nothing for their literacy in French.

From 1908 to 1927, Louis A. d'Entremont, a graduate of Collège Sainte-Anne, served as the Inspector for bilingual schools. The job was later divided between two inspectors with d'Entremont just doing Clare and Argyle and J.-Alphonse Benoît (Rémi Benoît's son) taking on Inverness and Richmond Counties. In his 1910 report, d'Entremont lists the 89 little bilingual schools in Acadian villages in Nova Scotia. Sixty years later (in 1970), primarily as a result of assimilation and the consolidation of schools, that number was reduced to 22. All the schools were still located in Acadian villages.

The years following d'Entremont's report brought only a few minor improvements to the French curriculum and to the textbooks. In 1930, Édouard Comeau was hired at the Normal College as the first French professor, but Acadian students had to take the same compulsory French classes as all the Anglophone students. In their 1965 report for the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Rawlyk and Haftner blamed the Acadian educators themselves for the lack of progress:

> Over the years they made many suggestions and many protests but always cautiously, quietly, discreetly, and so, as a result, they often failed to make any impression.

That judgement obviously does not recognize the challenges of a small and fractured minority. However, it must be said that even in the eyes of Acadian educators, a bilingual education did not really mean proficiency in both languages, especially since everything was in English after Grade 4. Writing about Acadian schools in Cape Breton in the late 1950s, Inspector Rémi Chiasson considered that Acadian children in Richmond County who started school with a knowledge of English were more advanced than the ones in Chéticamp who only spoke French. Nowadays we would say that the first group was assimilated. Chiasson stresses that,

> For the Acadian population there is above all the need of a speaking ability in the English language... A population of approximately 47,495, scattered from one end of the province to the other, out of a total population of 577,962 cannot live by itself. It must communicate with the English speaking element.

If the goal was to teach English as Chiasson indicates, then the bilingual schools were certainly successful. Speaking from the point of view of a person who attended those schools in the 1940s and 1950s, the well-known journalist Ralph Surette summarized the situation when I interviewed him in the year 2000 (I translate):

> In the final analysis, nobody left those schools capable of writing in French. Or if they could, their skills were very, very limited. The aim of school was to learn English. That was the mind-set at the time. We were such a small minority, that it was assumed that if we left our community, we would have to do things in English because there was no one you had to write to in French, except in the context of the Church.

Ironically, the majority of Acadian children like Ralph Surette who were born before the mid-1950s did not speak English before they started school. In other words, they only spoke the language that had been transmitted orally for generations since the 1600s. French was the language of the home and the community. However, English became part of family life as a result of the arrival of English television in 1953, the growing number of mixed marriages, and the consolidation of schools. Gradually more and more Acadian children were exposed to English in their homes and in their neighbourhoods. The increased presence of English in the halls and playgrounds of schools became noticeable earlier or later depending on the region.

In 1969, a seismic event took place in Ottawa that radically changed the status of the French language across Canada. This was the Act that made French and English the official languages of Canada. It was to have a very positive impact on Francophone minorities across the country. The Government of Canada then created the Official Languages in Education Program which provides financial support for minority language education and second-language instruction (i.e. immersion classes). As a result of the financial help of that federal program, a French-language curriculum was introduced in Acadian elementary schools in Nova Scotia. It was introduced slowly and to varying degrees depending on the acceptability by the community and the availability of qualified teachers.

In 1974 a French course and an Acadian History course were introduced at the high school level. They were designed specifically for students whose maternal tongue was French and both courses were offered in Grade 11 or Grade 12 in the high school in Chéticamp, Arichat, Meteghan River, and Sainte-Anne-du Ruisseau. These were the first all-French courses offered in Acadian high schools in Nova Scotia in almost 200 years.

Throughout the 1970s, in the hopes of stemming the continuing tide of assimilation, the newly formed Fédération acadienne de la Nouvelle-Écosse (FANE) concentrated its energies on trying to convince Acadian parents of the importance of education in French. One of the reports of the FANE states that experience in the field unfortunately showed "that parents were apathetic and indifferent with regard to education in French for their children."

In June 1981, the government of John Buchanan passed an amendment to the Education Act called Bill 65. It gave legal status to Acadian schools and stipulated that French would be the principal language of instruction, administration and communication. Basically this was paving the way for Nova Scotia to comply with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, published in 1981 and proclaimed in 1982. Section 23 of the *Charter* states that parents of a provincial Francophone minority have the right to have their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in French.

To clarify the goals of the Acadian school, the Minister of Education, Terry Donahoe, published guidelines for the ratio of instruction in French and in English. Essentially these guidelines indicated that all subjects (except for English) at the elementary level would be taught in French and students at the secondary level would have a minimum of three classes a year in French. Suffice to say, reactions to these suggested guidelines lead to heated public debates, especially with regard to the higher grades.

Initially, Acadian parents were concerned that “too much” French might jeopardize the future of their children. Based on their own experience, the average Acadian parent in the mid-1980s had no reason to believe that his or her children would be better off with an education that placed more emphasis on French. The schools in question were attended by a “mixed bag” of students – some whose parents were Francophone Acadians, others whose parents were assimilated Acadians, others who had a Francophone and an Anglophone parent, and others whose parents were Anglophones. Needless to say, that created a mishmash of conflicting interests.

The teachers themselves felt challenged because, as Gilles LeBlanc, a teacher at École secondaire de Clare, pointed out (I translate):

> The majority of our teachers received all their education in English – in elementary school, in secondary school, and at university. How do you expect them suddenly to be able to start teaching in standard French?

Given the necessity for teacher training and the mixture of students in the schools, it is not surprising that the gradual introduction of a French-language curriculum from Grade 7 to Grade 12 turned out to be a difficult and complicated process. Some students opted for the English programs, while others took the French programs. Only the École du Carrefour in Dartmouth was offering an all French curriculum and had its own school board. Finally, an important step was taken in 1996, when the government created a province-wide Acadian school board called the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP).

The organization grouping parents in favour of French education for their children, the Fédération des parents acadiens de la Nouvelle-Écosse (FPANE), took on the responsibility for awareness campaigns and advocacy work. Like Francophone parents in Manitoba and in Prince Edward Island, Acadian parents in Nova Scotia were forced to turn to litigation to ensure that their *Charter* rights were respected. The second and last court battle took place in October 1999. On that occasion the FPANE and six parents representing five school districts launched a court challenge. The six parents were Glenda Doucet-Boudreau, Alice Boudreau, Jocelyn Bourbeau, Bernadette Cormier-Marchand, Yolande LeVert and Cyrille LeBlanc. The parents applied to the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia for an order directing the Minister of Education and the CSAP to provide publicly funded, homogeneous French-language secondary schools within a reasonable length of time. In June 2000, Justice LeBlanc of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia handed down his decision, ordering the

provincial government to build homogenous French-language facilities in the five school districts of Kingston/Greenwood, Chéticamp, Isle Madame, Argyle, and Clare. The schools were built within the prescribed time frames. Essentially, this was a ruling designed to provide remedial measures to combat the assimilation of the Francophone minority in Nova Scotia and thus help preserve the French language.

The struggle for French-language schools was a long, hard uphill battle, but there would never have been any victories in Nova Scotia in the past 50 years without the protection and framework of the federal *Official Languages Act* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Eighteen years after Justice LeBlanc's ruling, there are now about 5,500 students attending the 22 schools in the CSAP. Nine of those schools and well over half of the students are located outside the Acadian regions. Contrary to the Acadian school of the past, the Acadian school of today is protected by law, the teachers have all been trained in Francophone universities, and it is well equipped with books and pedagogical material in French. For almost 200 years, the Acadian school was called bilingual, but the emphasis was on the teaching of English. Today the Acadian school is officially Francophone, but, with the Internet, ipads, and cell phones, the English language is even more present in the halls and schoolyards than it was 18 years ago. This creates a very challenging teaching environment and stresses the need for more cultural activities that bring French from the community into the schools.

Rural populations have declined throughout Nova Scotia, including in Acadian communities. As a result, two elementary schools in Clare (Saint-Albert in Salmon River and Jean-Marie Gay in Saulnierville) will close in July of this year. By 2020, there will only be one elementary school for the whole of Clare. This of course means that children will be bussed over much greater distances or their parents will send them to a school in the English system if it is closer. However, thanks in part to the pre-school program called *Grandir en Français* which takes 4 year-olds who do not speak French (i.e. children of rights-holders or *enfants des ayants droit*), enrolment is stable or increasing in the elementary school in Wedgeport, Pubnico, Belleville, Pomquet, Arichat and Chéticamp.

In addition, the enrolment in all the CSAP schools located outside the traditional Acadian areas is growing steadily – a very measurable sign of success. In fact, École Beaubassin in Bedford and École Bois-Joli in Dartmouth are seriously overcrowded. There is definitely an urgent need for a P to 12 CSAP school in central Halifax.

For generations, the Acadian school has been given the mission of saving and preserving the French language in a minority context. Obviously that mission has to be shared with the government, the community, teachers, parents, and the students themselves. In a province where every effort was made for 150 years to eliminate French from Acadian public schools, the very existence of the CSAP and its 22 schools is visible proof of resistence and survival. As the December 2017 CSAP report stresses (I translate):

> The Acadian school is more than just an educational establishment. It is a centre where members of the community meet for official and social occasions. It is a hub where the Francophone community living in a minority situation can affirm its identity.

Vive le français et surtout vive le parler acadien. Merci.

Bibliography

Sally Ross and Alphonse Deveau, *The Acadians of Nova Scotia* (Nimbus Publishing 1992).

Sally Ross, *Les écoles acadiennes en Nouvelle-Écosse 1758 - 2000* (Centre d'études acadiennes, Université de Moncton, 2001).

Marie-Éve Hudon, "The Case of Doucet-Boudreau v. Nova Scotia (Minister of Education)," Political and Social Affairs Division, Parliamentary Research Branch, Library of Parliament, PRB 03-19E, November 2003. (https://lop.parl.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublicationsArchive/pdf/bp1000/prb0319-e.pdf)

Marie-Éve Hudon,« L'affaire Doucet-Boudreau c. Nouvelle-Écosse (Ministre de l'Éducation) », Division des affaires politiques et sociales, Direction de la recherche parlementaire, Bibliothèque du Parlement, PRB 03-19F, novembre 2003. (https://bdp.parl.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublicationsArchive/pdf/bp1000/prb0319-f.pdf)

« Défis reliés aux espaces d'enseignement et d'apprentissage au service de la population étudiante du CSAP » (Conseil scolaire acadien provincial, décembre 2017).