

Dan Gardner . McGuinty's schools hypocrisy

Dan Gardner, The Ottawa Citizen

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With the issue of faith-based schools dominating the provincial election campaign so far, it's worth recalling that some years ago Dalton McGuinty was a strong advocate of extending public funding to religious schools.

That's right. McGuinty was passionate about it. It was practically the defining cause of his life. In an interview with the Citizen, he scorned those who claimed publicly funded religious schools were socially divisive. Faith-based "schools foster in their students tolerance and understanding for people of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds," he said.

The reader may be a little confused at this point. Isn't Dalton McGuinty passionately opposed to PC Leader John Tory's promise to extend public funding to religious schools? This very newspaper reported only yesterday that the premier wants to "grab Ontarians by the earlobes" and wake us up to the threat of publicly funded religious schools.

Ontario is diverse but socially cohesive, McGuinty said, thanks largely to "a publicly funded education system where we have children of all backgrounds and faiths, economic circumstances, to come together, to grow together and to learn together."

In case that didn't draw the lines sharply enough, McGuinty added, "if you want the kind of Ontario where we invite children of different faiths to leave the publicly funded systems and become sequestered and segregated in their own private schools, then they should vote for Mr. Tory. If they think it's important that we continue to bring our kids together, so that they grow together and learn from one another, then you should vote for me."

So how does this square with Dalton McGuinty's position years ago? Quite easily.

It was Dalton McGuinty Sr. -- a longtime Catholic school trustee and MPP -- who, in the early 1980s, pushed for the extension of public funding to senior grades in the Catholic system. The article I quoted was published Oct. 24, 1985.

It is Dalton McGuinty Jr. who insists that if any other faith gets the same funding his father demanded for Catholic schools, the province will go the way of Yugoslavia.

Oh, and Dalton McGuinty Jr. -- the premier, that is -- says he won't even discuss the removal of public funding from Catholic schools. That's the system we inherited, he says when pressed. It's in the Constitution. Of course he conveniently omits the fact that this can be changed with a quick, bilateral constitutional amendment, as Quebec and Newfoundland did in recent years. Now, ordinarily this would be the stuff of political trivia. The father held one view. The son believes the opposite. Oh well.

But this is much more than political trivia because Dalton Jr. has never given any indication that he thinks ol' dad was wrong. On the contrary. He's a devout Catholic who sends his own children to Catholic schools. His wife even teaches in the Catholic system.

I have to admit it makes me a little queasy to write about this. Dalton McGuinty Jr. is not only the premier. He's also a citizen. And Citizen McGuinty is entitled to make private decisions in private like everybody else.

But Citizen McGuinty is also Premier McGuinty and when Citizen McGuinty's private decisions flagrantly contradict Premier McGuinty's public statements, they are evidence of -- no pun intended -- bad faith. As such, it is entirely proper that they be discussed in the public forum.

When Premier McGuinty's political position is considered alongside Citizen McGuinty's evident support of publicly funded Catholic schools, logic suggests only two possible explanations.

First, Dalton McGuinty may feel that Catholic schools produce tolerant, socially integrated young citizens -- but graduates of Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and other faith-based schools are intolerant and socially marginalized. If so, then it makes sense to support public funding of Catholic schools while telling every other faith to do it on their own nickel.

But I really, really want to be in the room when the premier says Catholic education is superior to all others.

The other possibility is that Dalton McGuinty doesn't actually believe public funding of faith-based schools threatens social cohesion. His passionate opposition to John Tory's promise is, in this scenario, nothing more than cynical politics.

Now, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe there's a third possible explanation for why Citizen McGuinty supports public funding for Catholic schools but Premier McGuinty says extending that funding to other faiths' schools could destroy the province. I can't imagine what it is, but I'd love to hear it.

In the meantime, all I'm hearing from the McGuinty campaign is spin.

Earlier this week, John Tory said in a speech that he wants to extend funding to all faith-based schools but "Dalton McGuinty, he doesn't agree, even though he was educated in the Catholic system, or that his family fought hard for it. ... He doesn't think that children of other faiths should have the same opportunity he had."

So how do the Liberals respond to this rather modest observation?

This "seems perilously close to suggesting his Liberal opponent favours one religion over another," wrote McGuinty spin doctor Warren Kinsella on his blog. Dalton McGuinty is fighting to ensure that one religion -- his religion -- maintains an exclusive monopoly on government-funded education. But don't you dare suggest McGuinty is favouring one religion over others, says the spinner. Why, "that would be a dangerous way to fight an election."

This isn't just weird. This is down-the-rabbit-hole weird.

And it's not the first time Kinsella has come across like the Mad Hatter with a keyboard. When the Muslim Canadian Congress issued a press release denouncing John Tory's plan, Kinsella crowed about it on his blog. He even posted the release itself, which includes the following statements: "Religious organizations have no role to play when government services are provided to the public. ... For this reason, the MCC demands that every province in Canada should have a single public system, available to every child. We believe that only a single unified school system should be supported by tax dollars."

Curiouser and curiouser, thought Alice. Here's the premier's spin doctor attacking the premier's opponent by citing an opinion which condemns the premier's position.

It's not Kinsella's fault he's babbling. John Tory's position -- extend funding to all faiths -- is principled, consistent and defensible. The Ontario Green Party's position -- fund only one secular school system -- is also principled, consistent and defensible.

But Dalton McGuinty? No-funding-for-anyone-but-Catholics is unprincipled, inconsistent and not even a whole brigade of spin doctors could defend it.

And I hope Ontarians grab the premier by his earlobes and tell him so.

Dan Gardner's column appears Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. E-mail: dgardner@thecitizen.canwest.com