

readers'forum

John Borst

A Response to "Terror, Education and the State"

Don Rutledge in "Terror, Education and the State" (*On the Contrary*, vol. 42, no. 2) is misguided in his attempt to use the events of September 11 to justify his promotion of public education as a secular pursuit. In fact, what we know about the terrorists indicates they were not religious fundamentalists at all but well educated, middle class, secular Arabs who blended in easily with their American neighbors. Some even spent their last evening in a bar with female entertainers, something a fanatically devout Muslim would never do. Certainly, no one blamed Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma on his Catholicism.

Don seems to believe that Canadians are sacrificing "our hard won division of church and state." In fact there is no such specific clause in Canada's constitution. Surely he should know, Canada was founded on the principle of the protection of minority rights as it applied to education. Has Don forgotten that in the post-war public schools of his youth, the Christian religion was made a regular part of the curriculum in Ontario? Perhaps he was referring to the 1988 court rulings which ended the exclusivity of the Lord's Prayer and offering of religion courses as part of the regular curriculum. Neither ruling outlawed school prayer nor voluntary religion courses; however, the NDP's Memorandum 112 did go beyond the Appeal Court's ruling in the latter case and did ban them.

Rutledge, too, bemoans the increasing devotion of "public monies to private religious schools." Just what does he mean by this? Is he referring to the full funding of Catholic schools? Is he referring to Ontario's impending tax-credit to parents for any type of private school? If the former, then he appears ignorant of the open access provision that makes Catholic schools "public" or accessible to all. The reality in Ontario

is public schools, based on language, are less open to all than Catholic schools. Rutledge also appears to be ignorant, or willfully forgetful, of the wide variety of ways and the lengthy period of time other provinces have been funding, in varying amounts, both private religious and denominational public schools.

I would maintain that the principles of secularism based on the ideas of 18th century liberalism are just as much a belief system as any religion. That our American neighbors put their faith in such a system does not mean that Canada did in the same exclusive way. As Michael Ignatieff has described, Canada is unique in its recognition of diversity and the protection of group rights. The BNA Act recognized the minority rights of Catholic and Protestant Christians in 1867. Today we must recognize that Canada is composed of many more religions and that for the majority of Canadians religion is a cornerstone of their human and cultural identity. At the same time we must recognize that many are atheists, agnostics or humanists. The real challenge for public education in Canada is to find a way to broaden the tradition of religious minorities to educate their children within a publicly financed education system while simultaneously respecting the tradition of those who want a purely secular system.

If we fail, someday there will be no "rock" of a public school system, only a voucher driven series of private school systems. 🗨️

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Erratum : Dans le numéro d'hiver 2002, nous avons indiqué à la page 35 que les ouvrages *Évaluer pour évoluer : les indicateurs et les critères* et *Évaluer pour évoluer : les étapes d'une évaluation de programme ou de projet* de Louise Gaudreau ont été publiés chez les Presses de l'Université du Québec. Or, ils ont plutôt été publiés chez les Éditions LOGIQUES.

In the Winter 2002 issue, we mentioned on page 35 that Louise Gaudreau's two books, *Évaluer pour évoluer : les indicateurs et les critères* et *Évaluer pour évoluer : les étapes d'une évaluation de programme ou de projet*, were published by the Presses de l'Université du Québec. Please note that the actual publisher is Éditions LOGIQUES.