

LIFE OF BEAUCHESNE

II. The League for the Advancement of Education

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Arthur Beaudesne was Clerk of the House of Commons from 1925 to 1949 and author of the definitive work on Canadian parliamentary procedure. He worked for various Montreal newspapers from 1899 to 1904 but his journalistic career came to an abrupt halt following a dispute with the Archbishop of Montreal. His dismissal as editor of *Le Journal* (see previous issue) reflected a growing breach with the clergy illustrated by his involvement with an association dedicated to the promotion of public education in the province of Quebec.

Educational reform was high on the political agenda all across Canada during the first decade of the twentieth century. Quebec was feeling the impact of the industrial revolution and consequent urbanization. The traditional approach to education was open to debate. Should education be free? Should it be compulsory? More importantly, should ultimate control rest with the church or the state?

The pre-eminence of the Church in education had been a fact of Quebec life for hundreds of years. Powerful institutions and deeply rooted attitudes promoted the status quo. The mere idea of a Ministry of Education was anathema to the clergy. A leader of the educational reform movement was Godfrey Langlois, editor of the Montreal daily *La Patrie* and later of *Le Canada*.

According to Langlois, Quebec was twenty-five years behind Ontario in the field of education because of the province's lack of a department of education. In order to

rescue Quebec from this "humiliating" position, in order to keep the province abreast of educational progress in the world, and to arouse public interest and concern, it was time to appoint a Minister of Education, who, because he would be "responsible" to the legislature, would be more energetic in the reform and improvement of Quebec's system of education. The ministers responsible for the expenditure of provincial funds for the administration of justice, for public works, and for colonization were all accountable to the legislature for the manner in which these funds were employed. Only education was beyond the control of the people's representatives and of the tax-payers themselves.¹

Together with like-minded men, including Beaudesne, L.O. David, Clerk of the City of Montreal and later Provincial Secretary, Dr. E.P. Lachapelle, the Director of Public Health for the Province of Quebec, and some two hundred lawyers, notaries, judges, aldermen, teachers and businessmen Langlois established the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* at a public meeting held in the Poiré room of City Hall on October 9, 1902.

The objective of the League was to foster the development of public education. Toward this end, it proposed to sponsor public meetings, conferences, debates, publications and competitions. Membership was open to all. The cost was one dollar, except for teachers, who paid 50 cents, and journalists or editors, who were admitted free. The president of the League was Olivier Faucher, a businessman and former alderman. Langlois was first Vice President and Beaudesne was named Secretary on the fourteen man executive.

Note: Some quotes have been translated or summarized. For the original French text see this issue of the *Revue parlementaire canadienne*.

Even before the League was officially established, the Catholic press and particularly a Quebec City journalist, Jules-Paul Tardivel, accused its promoters of using educational reform to disguise a masonic plot whose real objective was the banishment of religious teachings from the schools. In those days an accusation of freemasonry was one of the most derogatory things that could be said about a person or an association; the equivalent of calling someone a fascist today.

Freemasonry, the teachings and practices of the secret fraternal order of Free and Accepted Masons, evolved from the guilds of stonemasons and cathedral builders during the Middle Ages. With the decline of cathedral building, some lodges of masons accepted honorary members to bolster their membership. From a few of these lodges developed modern freemasonry, which, in the 17th and 18th centuries, adopted the rites and trappings of ancient religious orders and chivalric brotherhoods. The first Grand Lodge, an association of lodges, was founded in England in 1717.

Freemasonry remains popular in the British Isles, Canada and the United States, where the membership is drawn mainly from protestant denominations. Though containing many religious elements (its teachings enjoin morality, charity and obedience to the law of the land), freemasonry is not a Christian institution. Some lodges have been prosecuted for discrimination against Catholics, non-whites and Jews.

In latin countries, freemasonry, attracted freethinkers and anti-clericals. In France, before 1789, it helped the forces which undermined the monarchy and eventually erupted in the French Revolution. The Revolution led to the complete subordination of church to state in France and in 1866 a journalist by the name of Jean Macé founded *La Ligue française de l'Enseignement*. Although the League was officially neutral toward the church, Macé was a freemason known for his hostility to clerical involvement in education. The French league was designed to keep the church out of education and to consolidate the reforms of the Revolution. As one of its members, Paul Bert, put it: "Peace to the vicar, war on the monk".

In Quebec, which was untouched by the French Revolution, freemasonry was considered nothing less than a satanic plot to be opposed with all possible vigour by the church. Beausnesne and the other founders of the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* were aware of the delicate terrain they were treading. Their publications and their speeches were full of moderation and assurances to the church.

Their first brochure, written largely by Langlois and Beausnesne, was dedicated to "the Legislature, the Catholic Committee on Public Education and to all friends of education." It emphasized support for the goals of the educational system as run by the church and acknowledged the important role of the family. It also argued that Quebecers, as a minority, had to be better educated. The traditional system seemed deficient in several ways. They cited statistics showing Quebec with the lowest per capita expenditure on education of all Canadian provinces. They noted that many schools were poorly furnished, poorly ventilated and that the laws establishing health standards were not being applied. They cited examples of other countries where every school had large grounds and the children were taught how to plant flowers and look after gardens.

The delicate question of the competence of teachers was broached by saying that many priests were simply too young and inexperienced to handle such an important task as education. Lay staff was so poorly paid that good people were not attracted and the criteria for competence and training established by law were not being respected because normal schools had no authority to set the standards.



Honoured and decorated throughout his career Beausnesne was most happy tilting at windmills. (PA-139681)

The document made no overt attack on the church but every criticism fell at its doorstep since the church was responsible for education in the province. The League's claim that public instruction was the responsibility of the state was absolutely unacceptable to the church.

Publication of the brochure was met with outrage by the Catholic press many of whom charged the founders with being freemasons. Tardivel said that the League, through its affiliation with the *Ligue française de l'Enseignement*, was "promoting the cause of freemasonry." Whether or not the Canadian League was in fact affiliated with the French one became the central question. It provoked a heated debate between Henri Bernard, a Frenchman living in Quebec, and Arthur Beausnesne.

In late 1903, Bernard published a 110 page book in which he claimed the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* was a masonic conspiracy. He recounted the moral decay of France, which he attributed to its godless school system and freemasonry. He predicted a similar fate for Quebec if the ideas expounded by the League were not stopped: "The Canadian League for the Advancement of Education is not a league that promotes education, but rather one that opposes religion. Education is the front behind which lurks irreligion and antichristianism."²

Bernard, (citing the considerable progress made in education since 1867,) denied the need to found such a league. He lauded the moral value of a Catholic education, which, he said, was responsible for the low crime rate in Quebec compared to the rest of Canada. As far as the preparation of students was concerned, he referred to authorities who claimed young French-Canadians were well prepared to enter the world of commerce or science, indeed their greater bilingualism gave them an advantage over their English-speaking counterparts. Why then create a league if not for some sinister, irreligious motive?

He then introduced as evidence a reply by Beauchesne to a letter from F.A. Baillargé, a priest in St. Hubert. Baillargé had asked several questions about the League. Did it favour use of uniform textbooks? What was its view on free education? Did it recommend compulsory education? Was it calling for the abolition of a monthly tax? Did it propose abolition of the *Conseil de l'Instruction publique*? He wanted to know whether the League favoured creation of a Ministry of Education? What reason was there to state that Quebec had done "so little" for education in over 50 years? What specific recommendations did the League have?

Beauchesne replied vaguely in *Le Journal*, saying that the League had no position on these matters.

If a member of the League favours the use of uniform textbooks, he is free to table a motion on the matter, which will then be discussed and voted on. His views will be given the respect due an honest citizen speaking about a public matter. The same right will be afforded any persons holding an opposing view. . . . Once the League has voted on a motion of this nature, I will then be in a position to tell Mr. Baillargé what its position is. Until then, I cannot.³

Beauchesne went on to deplore that the clergy had been misled by Tardivel and others. He pointed out that the League was open to everyone and that Abbé Baillargé had been invited to join.

Bernard claimed the reply showed the absence of any support for the League and went on to mount a personal attack against Langlois, whom he described as well known for radical ideas and open hostility to the church. As for Beauchesne, his "infamous" editorial about Mgr. Bruchési in March 1903 (see article in previous issue) discredited him completely according to Bernard.

Bernard then turned to the heart of his case, an article in the newsletter of the *Ligue française de l'Enseignement* announcing that a request for affiliation by a Canadian League had been received and was accepted at the Council meeting.

Bernard said M. Louis Herbette, of the *Ligue française* was the real danger. Langlois and Beauchesne were merely pawns in his quest to banish religion from schools everywhere. Bernard then went into a long digression on the *Ligue française* and its openly masonic leanings. He concluded: "It is your duty, my fellow French Canadians, to remain ever vigilant and, for the honour of Christ and Nation, keep the Masonic evil at bay and prevent it from ruining our country, as it has ruined dear France."⁴

The initial response to Bernard came in an article by Langlois. He denied the Canadian League was in any way affiliated with the French one and insisted that if M. Herbette had taken an initiative to that effect he was not authorized to do so.

The League for the Advancement of Education in Montreal is a fully independent organization with no affiliation whatsoever to foreign groups. It was founded on purely national and patriotic principles. . . . The League for the Advancement of Education, which was established in Montreal last



Beauchesne in 1901. Olivar Asselin nicknamed him the "Loup Marin" (Sea Lion) on account of his slipperiness in debate.

autumn, has never sought affiliation, either directly or indirectly, with the French organization, the head offices of which are located in Paris.⁵

Within a month of publication, Bernard's book was sold out. He published an expanded edition in 1904, which was even more virulent in tone and contained a preface by a French parliamentarian, le Comte Albert de Mun. Bernard also referred to an article by D.T. Bouchard, editor of *l'Union*, published in St-Hyacinthe. Bouchard said he had read the programme adopted by the League and, while he was not a member, he found its ideas on education quite sensible. Bernard, he said, was "as virulent in his attacks as he was lavish in his praise."⁶ In the revised edition of his book, Bernard suggested Bouchard join the League right away because, if he was not already a freemason, he had all the qualities to become one.

Bouchard counterattacked on two fronts. He launched a libel action against Bernard asking the newly admitted barrister Arthur Beauchesne to act on his behalf. Bouchard also asked Beauchesne to write a book length refutation which he would publish. Beauchesne's manuscript, entitled *La Fameuse Ligue: Conspiration maçonnique qui n'a jamais existé*, was delivered to Bouchard but publication was delayed pending result of the trial.

In this rejoinder Beauchesne began by apologizing for having to respond to such a concoction of misinterpretations and deliberate lies. Were Bernard an isolated individual, he would not have dignified his book with a response. But, he said, it was becoming clear that Bernard was just a tool of some members of the ultramontane clergy who were attacking the League with "an entirely unholy enthusiasm." They would stop at nothing.

In a Quebec convent, the nuns are saying novenas for my conversion and writing to my parents that I have become an agent of evil on this earth. . . . Mothers and young girls are cautioned by their moral advisers to avoid young people who are members of the infamous League. The names of many of us were sent to several presbyteries in Montreal, along with an order to do everything possible to fight and ruin us. The Catholic hierarchy is resorting to slander in an effort to compromise certain individuals! Religious influence is being used to appease the hatreds of some evil persons. They are reveling in the conduct of more slanderous attacks, of which I am one of the most unfortunate victims.⁷

Bernard had resorted to personal attacks and Beuchesne returned in kind. He ridiculed the comments by le Comte de Mun, who had never even set foot on Quebec soil. He mocked the clergy for their support of Bernard, whom he called a failed Frenchman. Preliminaries aside, Beuchesne turned to the main question. Was the League affiliated with the *Ligue française de l'Enseignement*? The evidence was entirely circumstantial, based on a single account of an innocuous motion by the French league welcoming establishment of a similar organization in Canada. Against that, Beuchesne pointed to the complete denial by Langlois. Furthermore, at the end of March 1904, the Quebec League passed a formal resolution denying having made any formal request for affiliation and stating that if such a request had been made it was done without their authority. A copy of the resolution was sent to Paris. Beuchesne said he also wrote to Louis Herbette asking if he had taken any initiative to affiliate the Quebec league with the French one.

Herbette replied in the negative, saying there was no affiliation and that the two groups, along with many others in several countries were carrying on campaigns for educational reform in a completely autonomous and independent manner. Personally, Herbette said, he had become much too busy to look after the day to day working of the *Ligue française* and he had no idea where the misinformation had come from. He added, however,

It is difficult to escape the false suppositions, announcements and assessments. I am not surprised that matters have gone this far. Yet I was somewhat surprised to read in the American newspapers that I was a freemason or a member of an antichristian sect or party. Clearly, one has to adopt some sort of philosophy when one has the unfortunate advantage of working not merely for one's own interests. When one has been assigned broader duties and responsibilities, every particular preference cannot be taken into account.⁸

Beuchesne also tried to track down the origin of the accusation that the Canadian and French organizations were affiliated by writing to the newspaper that first published it, *Correspondence Hebdomadaire*. He received no answer but concluded:

It is possible that the editorial staff was poorly informed. I have been a journalist long enough to know that newspapers, despite the best intentions in the world, are sometimes ignominiously duped. I have seen people publish fabricated stories for the sole purpose of using them later against their enemies. These tricks are understandable when we realize that publishers do not have the time to research in depth the facts they report to the public.⁹

According to Beuchesne, Bernard was interested only in making a name for himself and selling as many books as possible. Bernard's long discussion of the French organization was simply a weak attempt at establishing guilt by association.

It is easy to find some similarity between the sayings of Jean Macé, who said a great deal during his lifetime, and those of any other person. I would even wager that, by looking a little bit, I would find statements essentially similar to those of our ultramontanes. The professions of faith made by the pharisee in the temple bear a striking resemblance to Bernard's sentimental outpourings.¹⁰

A more important criterion, according to Beuchesne, was the reputation of the persons involved, nearly all of whom were men of high standing in Quebec. To say they were freemasons

engaged in an anti-religious crusade merely showed the ignorance of Bernard: "Only a perfidious hypocrite could invent such villainous acts."¹¹

Beuchesne's last chapter ignored Bernard and went back to some of the basic arguments in favour of the League.

The association of which I am secretary does not want to consider matters of conscience. It is not necessary to have any special beliefs in order to speak of health in educational establishments, of the age and salary of teachers, of improvements to the school or of other such matters. Lay persons have the inalienable right to see to it that their children are well treated and receive a solid, practical education. As for religion, they know that it is well guarded by the clergy and they have no cause to worry. Not that they are complaining, although there appears to be a general sense of public dissatisfaction with respect to the sorry state of many of our schools.¹²

To teach literature, he said, it is not sufficient to be a good Christian. You have to know literature and know how to teach.

I knew some people who were kitchen boys immediately before they became teachers. They were credited with the title of teacher because their behaviour was beyond reproach. This, however, proved to be a mistake. The students assigned to these young teachers wasted most of their time.¹³

Beuchesne's manuscript never saw the light of day. The courts found Bernard not guilty of libel but ordered him to pay the legal costs. Shortly thereafter Bernard left Quebec to study theology in St. Boniface, Manitoba. He became ordained in 1908. Satisfied that Bernard "was condemning himself to voluntary seclusion by entering a religious order," Bouchard decided not to publish Beuchesne's response.¹⁴ ■

Notes

¹Ralph, Heintzman, "The Struggle for Life: Montreal French Daily Newspapers 1896-1911," Doctoral dissertation, York University, 1979, p. 479.

²Henri Bernard, *La Ligue de l'enseignement: histoire d'une conspiration maçonnique à Montréal*, Notre-Dame-des-Neiges-Ouest, 1903, p. 105.

³*Le Journal*, January 31, 1903.

⁴Bernard, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁵*Le Canada*, July 21, 1903.

⁶*L'Union*, December 23, 1903.

⁷Public Archives of Canada, Beuchesne Papers, *La Fameuse Ligue: Conspiration maçonnique qui n'a jamais existé*, 1904, pp. 2-4.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁴T.D. Bouchard, *Mémoires*, Beauchemin, Montreal, 1960, vol. 2, p. 50.