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A contrast in PC premiers

EDITORIAL

WAS IT PURELY a coincidence that the worst experience Ontario has ever had in brgaining between its government and teacher unions happened after a Liberal government headed by a former education minister was replaced by one with a premier who is said to have left school after Grade 10?

Progressive Conservative Premier Doug Ford and his education minster, Stephen Lecce are sticking to claims that the only real issue in the talks with all four teacher unions is salaries, with the unions wanting a 2 per cent per annum raise that would keep pace with the current level of general inflation.

However, the reality is that the escalating strike actions by all four unions has already meant the teachers likely won't see any ncrease at all because their strike pay won't begin to cover the loss in wages caused by the strikes.

It's interesting to reflect on how far we have come from a little more than a half-century ago, when the Progressive Conservative premier of the day, London's John Robarts, picked Peel MPP Bill Davis as his first education minister.

First elected in 1959, Mr. Davis was appointed to the Robarts cabinet as Minister of Education on October 25, 1962. He was given additional responsibilities as Ontario's Minister of University Affairs on May 14, 1964, and held both portfolios until 1971, when he succeeded Mr. Robarts as premier.

He soon developed a reputation as a strongly interventionist minister, and oversaw a dramatic increase in education expenditures throughout the 1960s, education spending growing by 454% between 1962 and 1971). He established many new public schools, often in centralized locations to accommodate larger numbers of students.

He also undertook dramatic and, at the time, controversial revisions of Ontario's outdated and inefficient school board system, reducing the number of boards from 3,676 in 1962 to 192 by 1967.

He also established new public universities as minister, including Trent University and Brock University, and established the province's community college system. He was also responsible for the establishment of Canada's first educational research institute, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OOISE) in 1965 and the establishment of the Ontario Educational Communications Authority educational television network (now TVOntario) in 1970.

Mr. Davis' handling of the education portfolio made him a high-profile minister, and there was little surprise when he won the leadership contest to succeed Mr. Robarts in 1971.

Then and in the years that followed, relavtive peace reigned between the government and the various teacher unions, and Ontario continued to enjoy an education system that was regarded as the best in Canada and one of the best in North America.

In the circumstancesd, it would be interesting, indeed, to know what Bill Davis thinks about the current sad situation. Currently 90 and showing his years, he still would no doubt be one of the few Progressive Conservatives who could resolve the current impasse.

There's surely no doubt that the Ford government has seen education as a key area in which they can work toward eliminating the budgetary deficits inherited from the governments of Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne.

Having cancelled some billions of dollars in revenue sources from the Liberals' cap and trade scheme targeting greenhouse gases, and likely realizing that no big savings will accrue from its overhaul of the health care system, the government sees its current education spending ? about $29.8 billion ? as having room for big savings if it keeps to its demand for 1% salary hikes, bigger class

sizes and mandatory online classes where at least hypothetically one teacher could replace hundreds.

Perhaps the most difficult area in the on-again, off-again negotiations lies in the fact that for a first time the government imposed the pay limits and other cost-cutting before entering into any bargaining.

The result seems to be that the government czn claim to have been bargaining in good faith by simply offering to modify some of the cuts, rather than agreeing to abandon the cuts in exchange for the unions accepting the 1% pay raise.

In the circumstances, we await with bated breath the end of the record=long MPPs' vacation next Tuesday when the Legislature is finally back in business.

Since neither the government nor the NDP Official Opposition wants to see the dispute resolved by an arbitrator, it may be left to the handful of Liberals left in the chamber to advance the idea.