

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

A Most Canadian Odyssey: Education Diplomacy and Federalism, 1844 - 1984

By John Allison

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A joke made the rounds of Canadian academic and governmental circles in the 1960s and 1970s to the effect that, if “the elephant” were assigned as an open-ended essay topic to a class of promising graduate students in international politics at Harvard or Oxford, the one Canadian in the room would choose this approach: “The elephant - a federal or provincial responsibility?” And while the title of John Allison’s book would indicate extended coverage of nearly a century and a half of intergovernmental relations, his focus is on the two decades when Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau headed Liberal governments in Ottawa that faced increasingly assertive provincial administrations. Concerning the core topic of education diplomacy, Allison asks, “Is it a federal or provincial responsibility?”

The British North America Act of 1867 that established the ground rules for self-government in the newly federated Dominion of Canada was clear on the first part. Section 93 stated unequivocally that “in and for each Province the Legislature may exclusively make Laws in relation to Education” (Dawson & Ward, 1970). Diplomacy was less straightforward. In 1867, Canada was still a colony of Britain. International relations were handled from Westminster. Gradually, as Canada followed the path from colony to nation,

relations with foreign countries assumed greater importance, and the dominant role of Ottawa in this emerging field became apparent. The Statute of Westminster, 1931, which recognized the legal sovereignty of six Dominion Parliaments, including Canada, seemed to confirm that interpretation. Buried within this law, however, was a special provision that applied only to Canada: “The powers conferred by this Act upon the Parliament of Canada . . . shall be restricted to the enactment of laws in relation to matters within the competence of the Parliament of Canada” (Dawson & Ward, 1970). Ottawa was not empowered by the Statute to poach upon the prerogatives of the provincial governments.

In defining “education diplomacy” for the purposes of this book, Allison casts his net widely. For him, the concept means “the sum of diplomatic activities undertaken by diplomats, politicians, administrators, educators, and citizens to represent Canada abroad in the field of education” (p. 5). As examples of the kinds of activities he has in mind, the author lists:

participating in international exhibitions, attending meetings with affiliated interest groups, being a signatory to education-related treaties, and implementing those treaties, . . . education visits by international delegations, international exchange policies and agreements, aid programs, multilateral educational conferences (p. 5).

In all of these matters, the constitutional dilemma is the same. Which level of government has jurisdiction? Is it the provinces, since education is clearly a provincial power? Or is it Ottawa, since relations with foreign countries are the responsibility of the central government? The frustrating, but correct, response is that it is both. Thus, when Allison poses the key question for his book, “why Canada has not had, and still does not have, a coherent education diplomacy” (p. 2), the obvious answer would seem to be that such coherence is impossible in a federal system that allocates education to one level of government and diplomacy to the other. The author is not so easily placated. He attributes the deficiency to “the tenacity of provincial actors and the desire on the part of the federal government to not to open yet another front in the ongoing federal-provincial dialogue” (p. 2)—stubborn on the one hand, and reserved on the other.

The book begins with a longitudinal, Ontario-centric study of “early educational diplomacy, 1800-1967” (p. 13). The efforts of Egerton Ryerson to base the budding school system of his home province on the best ideas to be gleaned from several

fact-finding trips abroad is depicted as an important milestone in Canada's education diplomacy. Another significant development was the formation of the Canadian Education Association as a kind of national lobby group for the various educational interests. However, its attempts to find a prominent role in education at the international level soon ran into an expanding federal Department of External Affairs. The growing friction between Ottawa and the provinces over the field of education diplomacy came to a head with the election of an activist, increasingly nationalist, government in Québec. As part of the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s, the provincial government took control of education from the Catholic Church, and energetically sought to re-create Québec as a modern, urban, and industrialized society. Under the leadership of Paul Gerin-Lajoie, the Minister of Education, Québec sought guidance from other countries in la Francophonie, particularly France. When this culminated in the signing of an international accord in 1965, and the participation of Québec representatives at a 1968 educational conference in the African state of Gabon, Ottawa became alarmed. The result was the issuance of a document, "Federalism and International Conferences in Education," (p.68) that asserted the primacy of the federal government in international relations.

A new lobby group, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) was formed in the 1960s to coordinate the ten provincial voices in the field, and facilitate their dealings with the federal government. Allison does not interpret that development as a positive one, however, stating that "the integration of the Council of Ministers into the wider context of Canadian federalism retarded the regularization of education diplomacy" (p. 119). As a united front, the CMEC "aggressively insisted on a lead role in treaty negotiations," thus reinforcing "the federal need to defend its leadership prerogative" (p.138). He appears to concur with the authors of an international review of Canada's educational system, conducted in the mid-1970s by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In their report, "the Examiners took aim at the forbidden question: the place of education in the Canadian Constitution" (p. 107).

The author is not optimistic that an OECD recommendation for a coherent and sustained national educational policy will arrive any time soon. As Allison notes in his final paragraph, "the constitutional conundrum that characterizes Canadian education diplomacy remains unresolved." It is, indeed, the elephant in the room.

References

Dawson, R. M. & Ward, N. (1970). *The Government of Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.