

A FAUX PAS

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On October the 10th Ontarians will be casting their votes to elect a new provincial parliament and hence a new government. The two contenders for the prize are the Liberal and the Conservative parties. The NDP and the Green Party are secondary players that may tip the balance.

The principal issue that divides the parties in this election is the proposed faith based school funding which is in the conservative platform. By latest polls the populace is almost equally divided on this matter, but support for the parties does not mirror peoples' preferences. If this matter of school funding were an item for referendum, such as the question of proportional representation, I would have refrained from raising some questions that are relevant to the Armenian community in Ontario.

As a general observation I'd like to concur with many in the press that the current practice of funding the Catholic schools alone is discriminatory. However, comparing the Catholic Schools with most of the other "faith-based" schools is not congruent with facts. The Catholic schools educate children from various ethnic backgrounds such as Irish, French, Italian, German, South American Latinos, etc. Whereas most of the other non public schools, as understood in this context, are primarily based on ethnicity. I'll confine myself to Armenian schools to make the point. Do Armenians send their children to Armenian schools solely because they follow the apostolic faith? Aren't there parents who are of other denominations, such as Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals who prefer the Armenian schools principally because of ethnic and communal considerations, and driven by motives other than religion? I know of skeptics and atheists too.

Is the Armenian community a participant in the present discussion? Vocally it is not, but silently yes. On August 28th CBC News released the information that "Religious groups call for faith-based schools funding", and "leaders from the Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Armenian Communities held a media conference...to announce the creation of the Public Education Fairness Network". The group said, "It plans to launch an advertising campaign to make it a prominent election issue, but denies that it will endorse any one political party." It's been already more than a fortnight since the news was circulated, yet there is no mention of it on the websites of St. Mary's Armenian Apostolic Church and the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church, the two main worship centres in GTA.

The Conservative Party is the only side that's advocating faith-based school funding as mentioned above. Being a partner in a "Network" as described is making a political statement, and by default supporting that party. Is the Armenian religious leader or whoever is pursuing the idea and participating in this "Network" an elected representative to speak on behalf of the whole community? Were the various stakeholders in the community consulted? Such a partnership entails a political commitment and lending the support of the whole community to one particular party. To my understanding Armenians, like others in Ontario, are divided both on the funding issue and supporting any of four political parties. If community leaders of all stripes, board members, educators were consulted and were in agreement why then the community at large was not informed?

This writer believes that it is high time that various decision makers in the community consult each other prior to making broad announcements on behalf of the whole community. Silence is not always an indicator of approval of what goes on.

