

PARLIAMENTARY JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION.

FRIDAY, 10th AUGUST, 1888.

REV. RAINSFORD BAVIN, examined.

420. HON. THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Bavin, you have expressed a wish to give evidence here on the grievance of the Catholics and others in regard to the education system of the Colony—I was not aware of the specific nature of the investigation. I understood, in a general sense, that it was on certain proposed amendments of the Education Act.

421. What is your position in the Wesleyan Methodist Church?—I am chief pastor in this city, and for the present year I am President of the Wesleyan Conference of New Zealand.

422. Have you body presented any petition to Parliament in regard to the Education Act?—Not that I am aware of.

423. What is the number of Wesleyans under your charge?—There are three churches in the city with sitting accommodation for 1100, 250, 150; that is the actual sitting accommodation.

424. How many do your body number in the Colony?—About 40,000, according to the census returns.

425. Have you any special school of your own?—Only one in the Colony.

426. Do the children of your denomination attend the State schools?—Yes, generally speaking.

427. Have you any religious objection to their attending these schools?—None whatever; on the contrary, speaking as pastor to my own members, I encourage them to attend. I think it is a very admirable system.

428. How many children are there at this one school you spoke of?—Not more than fifty; it is only a small infants' school, existing under very peculiar circumstances.

429. Are you aware that the Catholics have a conscientious objection to availing themselves of the State system?—I am.

430. Are you in the habit of visiting the State schools?—Yes. For many years past I have been more or less associated with the public system. In Nelson I was a member of the School Committee for two years, and, as such, I visited the schools. At Wanganui I was Chairman of the Grammar School Committee; and I have held an appointment for some years under the Minister of Education as Inspector of teachers in one particular department. On these accounts I have had pretty full opportunities of familiarising myself with the public schools of the Colony.

431. Are you aware that the Catholics have schools solely at their own expense?—Yes.

432. Have you visited any of them?—No.

433. In visiting the State schools, have you found many Catholic children in them?—I am not able to answer that question.

434. Have you examined any children in the public schools as to their religious knowledge?—No.

435. Can you tell the number of schools the Catholic have at their own expense?—I have no means of knowing beyond having observed generally that in every important centre they have their own schools, and usually, I believe efficient schools.

436. Are you aware that there are children of other denominations attending them?—Yes.

437. Are there any Methodists at these schools?—Very few indeed.

438. Do you find that parents of your denomination have any great objection to their children attending the Catholic schools?—They have.

439. Upon what principle?—I am prepared to say they have conscientious objections.

440. Can you state that the Catholic schools are under the supervision of Government?—By no means, as far as my information goes.

441. Do you think they have any objection to it?—I am not able to answer that question.

442. Do you approve the State system of education?—I do not approve of the operations of the present Act in so far as the course of instruction provided under it must be purely secular. I should like to be permitted to say that in making that statement in no sense do I claim to represent the Wesleyan Church. I am quite aware that, both as regards ministers and people, we are divided on the question. A good many very excellent ministers and members approve the present system, secular and compulsory as it is, while on the other hand I am prepared to state that a great number—I am not prepared to state the proportions—of ministers and members are aggrieved at the operations of the present Act, with myself, for this twofold reason: first, that there is no recognition whatever of the Divine Being; secondly, that the Bible is proscribed book.

443. Do you approve of the Bible being read in all schools daily?—I do, provided that it shall be guarded by a strong conscience-clause, and that the power is left in the hands of the local Committees. I state this because I know there are some of the day-school teachers in whose hands I, for one, would be very sorry indeed to see the reading of the Bible permitted. They are pronounced sceptics, and for that reason, taking the thing as it is just now, I should prefer Bible-reading being permissive, the power being left in the hands of the local Committees.

444. Do you object to the principle of laymen reading the Scriptures?—Not at all. I say this because I do not want one who avowedly disbelieves in a God or the Bible to be called upon to read the Bible in the day-school.

445. Then, you condemn the Government for appointing teachers not in any way suited for that office?—I think it is a misfortune and a wrong that teachers who are known to be sceptics should be appointed to that office. I do not think any great proportion are of that class, but, seeing there are some, I should be prepared to say, without disturbing the existing order of things, let the question of Bible-reading be left in the hands of the local Committees. That is the view I hold.

446. Do you approve of denominational education?—I am not prepared to reply to that question in the affirmative, I scarcely know what it means. If it means, Do I wish to see the present national system broken up? I say, No; certainly not. But I think the withholding of the Bible from the day-schools is imperilling the present system in New Zealand, for which I have fought for years past. I think that allowing the Bible to be read would be a valuable means of strengthening and consolidating the present system of education. At the same time I have no objection personally against grants-in-aid being made to those denominations who cannot conscientiously send their children to the present schools; always provided that their schools are under Government inspection, and that the payment is according to actual ascertained results.

447. The statistics say the Catholics number one-seventh of the population. Do you think it would be wise and just that they should have a fair proportion of the grant for education given them for the support of their schools?—I could not single out any particular religious communion, but I am prepared to say that, in my own judgment, I see no objection against any religious body that through conscientious objections could not send their children to the present schools receiving payment from the State for secular education imparted by them under Government inspection, according to ascertained results.

448. Do you consider that any relief should be given the Catholics on the grievance they allege they suffer?—Personally I think so, on the ground that any grant-in-aid made to them or to anybody else for the secular results produced in their schools is not money granted to build up a religious system. The State takes no cognizance whatever of the religion or irreligion taught in the schools; but this money is paid on account of secular educational results produced; and if these results are satisfactory to the Inspectors appointed by the Government, and in every other respect their schools come up to the standard prescribed, then I fail to see that there is any wrong done in that, or that the grant in any sense can be said to be a grant to that particular denomination. It is on account of secular results produced only.

449. What alteration of the present Act would you suggest to remove the grievance of the Catholics without inflicting injustice on other denominations?—I am not prepared to answer that question except so far as the statement I made just now is an answer. I am prepared to say what alterations in the Act I should personally like to see.

450. Have your denomination made any claim to the Government for anything for denominational schools?—Not since the Act of 1877 has been in force.

451. Then, your body does not object to the present system?—We have not taken any action as a body, although, in my own judgment, such action is looming. I do not think it will be long before there will be action in favour of Bible-reading in schools, but not beyond that.

452. In your visits to the State schools, do you find that the children of other denominations besides yours are backward in the knowledge of Scripture?—I have no means of ascertaining, inasmuch as the course prescribed in the present Act is entirely secular. If you mean, Do I consider that under the operations of the present Act there is any considerable amount of religious ignorance in consequence? I am prepared to say I believe there is.

453. Do you think that secular education tends very much to infidelity.—No, not very much. I am not prepared to say it does. At the same time I believe the outcome of the present Act is to withhold the knowledge of God and the Bible from a number of children—I will not say a considerable number—who neither get this knowledge from the Sunday School nor in their homes. They do not, therefore, get it at all. I have ascertained that is a fact. And I believe there is a considerable increase of "larrikinism" and crime as the outcome of it.

454. HOW. DR. GRACE: Will you state what you mean exactly in saying you believe the withholding of the Bible from schools is imperilling the present system?—I mean there is a growing amount of dissatisfaction with the present Act in consequence of the exclusion of the Bible, and thus it is alienating many of those who had been supporters of it. Generally speaking, we went in heartily as a body for the present national system, and consented to give up our day-schools for it—we had some important schools in Canterbury, for instance—on the understanding, I believe, that the repetition of the Lord's Prayer and Bible-reading was then contemplated under the national system. But, in consequence of the Act being entirely secular, I am bound to say that, in my own judgment, a good many of our own people, and a good many of the public generally, are becoming dissatisfied with the Act. And I think that any provision in the Act which occasions any large or growing amount of complaint is imperilling the system.

455. Were the schools your body had before 1877 efficient and satisfactory?—I believe they were, both to our body and to the Government Inspectors.

456. Were you in the habit of receiving State aid.—Yes.

457. To what extent?—It was under the provincial system. I do not remember the exact amount. In Canterbury, for instance, it was the amount prescribed under the Education Ordinance of the province.

458. It was of material assistance?—Yes.

459. Did you supplement that amount by the voluntary system.—We did.

460. To what extent do you suppose your voluntary contributions went on a capitation basis. Was it a heavy tax?—No; it was chiefly in the shape of school fees, which, together with the capitation allowance, almost supported the schools. I was Acting Chairman of the School Committee in Kaiapoi for a year, and, as far as I can remember, the only actual cost upon us outside the fees was the cost of erecting and maintaining the buildings.

461. What were the school fees?—I am not able to say precisely. They ranged from 4d to 8d or 9d a week. I know we had a graduated scale in the case of families. If there were several children in a family, there was a proportionately smaller fee.