



IDENTITY, EDUCATION, AND POWER

REFLECTIONS ON DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE DURING THE NOVA SCOTIA TEACHERS' STRIKE

BY TINA ROBERTS-JEFFERS



BACKGROUND

ON TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2017 33 MEMBERS OF THE NOVA SCOTIA LEGISLATURE (ALL MEMBERS OF THE LIBERAL CAUCUS, THE GOVERNING PARTY) VOTED TO PASS BILL 75, THE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL AGREEMENT AND CLASSROOM IMPROVEMENTS (2017) ACT, INTO LAW. THE PASSING OF THIS BILL ENDED A CONTRACT DISPUTE THAT SAW THE NOVA SCOTIA TEACHER'S UNION TAKE STRIKE ACTION FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ITS 122 YEAR HISTORY.

"I shall tell you a thing about giants that you do not wish to know: Giants look in the mirror and see almost nothing at all. But they leave their houses nevertheless. They lurch out of doors to reach you, the other stretchers and strainers."

– GWENDOLYN BROOKS, from the poem "Jane Addams"

On a rainy Sunday afternoon, in the fall of 2016, I attended my first Nova Scotia Parents for Teachers meeting. I hopped on a bus and joined fewer than 10 people at the home of one of the group's organizers. The handful of us who gathered in person and via Skype would become the Steering Committee for Nova Scotia Parents for Teachers.

During that first meeting I stumbled upon a simple truth that characterized my perspective on the ongoing labour dispute: I trusted teachers more than I trusted the government. It was teachers and principals who greeted me in the morning on the playground; and who sat around board room tables at 6, 7, 8 o'clock at night for monthly School Advisory Council and PTA meetings discussing education policy and the best way to create inclusive, supportive environments for all students (after a long day at school); teachers who volunteered to cook breakfast for hungry children, and teachers who led reading clubs or intramural sports during lunch; teachers in my faith community; teachers who I

respected and appreciated; teachers who I witnessed showing up for our children every day.

Political dramas on television (and political theorists I have yet to read, likely) suggest that an important aspect of being successful in politics is tapping into how people feel. If I feel strongly about something, that feeling holds weight, sinks into the depths of me and grounds me, making it difficult to change course, even if I want to create a new narrative. Certain ideas echo throughout our society, reflecting our deepest held beliefs. What follows describes what I hear (and heard) about identity, education, and power during the most recent contract dispute between the NSTU and the governing party of the day.

I begin with identity. Our personal, communal, national identities envelop us, and impact our lives in a manner many of us aren't conscious of moment to moment. When we walk down a street or fly into an airport, what the names etched into buildings and street signs say about our identities mainly goes unexamined. I have a hard time remembering Kijipuktuk, the Mi'kmaq name for what we call Halifax. For thousands of years this place was likely known as Kijipuktuk, but as we don our identities as proud Canadians celebrating 150 years since Confederation, that aspect of our collective identity is hidden, buried, erased. The feeling that Canada is a relatively young nation, ever-striving for freedom and opportunity for all, allows us to imagine that the perspectives and policies that led to genocide and residential schools are somehow distant. We carry on, as if there isn't still a disparity between how much the government spends on child welfare in First Nations' communities compared to everywhere else.

With regard to the most recent contract dispute with teachers, one aspect of teacher identity that I consistently landed on was gender (not to minimize race, class, sexual orientation, or any other aspect of self). In Nova Scotia, teachers are overwhelmingly women, about 70%. After the NSTU made the decision to take job action in the form of work to rule,

much attention was paid to the "safety" of children should teachers cease doing the unpaid volunteer labour Nova Scotians have (collectively) grown accustomed to them doing. We are to believe that legislators and executives should be compensated well for their hard work and dedication (and are capable of not collapsing the system by taking too much for themselves), yet teachers as (highly skilled) public sector employees are characterized as greedy and self-interested for exercising their right to bargain.

Beyond gender, and identity more generally, however, is the equally important conversation that needs to be had about public education. Education and democracy are so tightly linked. Literacy and numeracy skills are essential for most employment in 2017, but even more important is the utility of self-expression and creativity. Writing a poem might remind someone of their own humanity in the moment where they need the reminder most. Public education systems are grounded in the idea that having access to education is a human right and that we are all better if everyone in the community has access. Neoliberalism might reduce education to one's place in the labour market, but there is freedom in a quality education.

Freedom is complex. From the time I was a child my mother would dutifully bring my sister and me along with her to every election she voted in. As an immigrant, it has taken time to develop a thorough understanding of how politics work here in Nova Scotia, in Canada. Being engaged in the contract dispute provided first-hand lessons. Sharing my concerns at press conferences, rallying in protest outside the legislature, naively believing the law amendments committee would sit until every person who had followed the procedures had an opportunity to speak, I felt uplifted by the power of the people at times, and deflated by how immovable the power structure can be at other times.

During the final stages of Bill 75 becoming law, the legislature was recalled for midnight. I stood with groups of teachers waiting to get into Province House in the

bitter cold after a rally. Police officers allowed in only five people at a time. Eventually word came down that they would only allow five or six more people into the gallery (despite the fact that more seats remained open).

I made my way inside, showed my ID, found a seat, and watched as business moved along like any other day. Members of the public had been denied the opportunity to speak at the law amendments committee, the legislature had been called back into session in the middle of the night when most residents were at home asleep or preparing for the next day at school or work, and teachers around the province braced themselves for the inevitable. Bill 75 would be passed.

The idea that "things can get back to normal" seemed problematic to me. But things are not the same.

At one point more than 20,000 people were members of the Nova Scotia Parents for Teachers Facebook group. Ordinary women and men pretended to be giants and fought for a well-funded education system that meets the needs of the province's children. Teachers and parents alike joined "broken glass groups", vowing to crawl over broken glass before the current government regained a majority. This dispute sparked conversations between students and their teachers, children and their parents about democracy and public service. High school students organized themselves in support of their teachers and in support of themselves. People found power and strength in collaboration, and I was reminded that, although the powerful may have the advantage, there are mechanisms in place to challenge the status quo and education is as important a battle ground as any to advocate for the full freedom, dignity, and respect of all people in Kijipuktuk. ●

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