

Heroes of the fight against Bill 64

JOHN R. WIENS

LINDA Ballantyne (Frontier), Laurie Dyck (Garden Valley), Betty Edel (Winnipeg), Penny Helgason (Evergreen), Louise Johnston (Louis Riel), Jan McIntyre (Prairie Spirit), and Wendy Bloomfield (Seine River) — these are some of my local heroes.

I have followed the work of these humble and courageous women who are school board chairpersons of their respective school divisions, and who took significant risks in their communities to illuminate and oppose Bill 64 — the now-deceased Education Modernization Act.

All Manitobans should be grateful for their leadership, their integrity and their resolve in helping overthrow a piece of legislation which would have hugely compromised the provision of public education in Manitoba.

Being a school board chairperson is a hard job at the best of times, let alone during a serious attack on the fundamental lifeblood of schools and core principles of educating all children. To the person, these women led the sometimes-contentious discussions at their board levels, responded to community concerns, represented their boards conscientiously and presented strong, reasonable positions to the public.

As elected leaders, they lived up to their legal obligations under the Public Schools Act and the moral commitments of their oaths of office. And they did so without fanfare or self-glorification — always giving credit to others instead of claiming it for themselves.

Like true leaders, they engaged all members of their communities, navigating and evaluating the various perspectives which represented them and supporting other community efforts. They worked hard to inform people, keep people informed by being open about their intentions and activities, ensuring that opposing points of view were considered

and encouraging decisive actions based on their best judgments. The respect they showed for others, and for their roles and responsibilities, was exemplary.

Likewise, they acted with the integrity even when dealing with a government determined to eliminate elected school boards. School boards are accustomed to working with governments, not against them. Working against the government in power left them very conflicted at first. Throughout the education review and its aftermath, boards sought ways to engage stubbornly partisan politicians regarding the potentially disastrous impacts of Bill 64 on their communities and the education of children, often to no avail, receiving either “canned” responses or none at all.

Nor did they succumb to the temptation to meet government propaganda with their own false claims. They spoke simple honest truths to their local communities. Instead, at all times, they attempted to present sound, supportable arguments, reasonable actions and a willingness to work together with others. In some cases, they requested the assistance of their constituents and support of municipal leaders, but always in an open forthright way.

They played no political games, harboured no secret strategies and did not participate in behind-the-scenes, clandestine behaviours or tricks. They never gave up.

While I know for a fact they sometimes questioned themselves and wondered if the public ideals they held were about to fail them and all of us, they forged onward resolutely in the most democratic and educational ways. Putting on no airs, more overworked than overpaid, they were true to themselves, their calling and their own education, giving more credit to their boards and communities than they claimed for themselves.

Their faith in the goodness of people and the rightness of their cause sustained them through their darkest times. They acted as true democratic citizens, an example to the rest of us, welcoming the opportunity to serve.

The inherent currency, and ultimate core, of trusteeship is trust. And the strength of trusteeship is rising above non-partisanship. The opposition of boards to Bill 64 is a tribute to both that trustworthiness and loyalty to public education in the face of one of the biggest and most blatantly partisan challenges ever encountered in Manitoba.

All Manitobans owe these women and the many people who worked tirelessly by their sides, especially their fellow trustees, an overwhelming debt of gratitude. More than any other part of the public school system, although not alone, they were under attack — repeatedly and consistently insulted, belittled, declared irrelevant and obstructionist — still they did not waiver.

In that sense, they were not only citizens, but also true educators of the public, teaching the rest of us how to be and act in the face of wrongful attacks.

I would encourage all educators, including the people who work in and with schools, to take the opportunity to thank these leaders and their trustee counterparts for standing up for them publicly against powerful opposition and severe adversity.

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