

JINNY SIMS OPENING REMARKS

I want to thank the group who organized this for the invitation I received, and I really am glad to be here, even though we did not manage to communicate on many occasions. I want to tell you a little bit about myself because I think that explains where people come from and then I will be talking also about the BCTF position on some of the issues which is important for us to take a look at.

I was born in India, as was explained, in a Sikh family. My father immigrated to England while I was a bit younger and five years after he had left, my mother with four of us moved to England. I arrived in England kicking and screaming did not want to move or leave my grandparents.

And once I got to school in England, I was registered in an elementary class that was streamed from A to E, and because I had no language, of course, I was in the E stream. And I remember being called into the headmistress's office -- her name was Lady Ponsoby-Duck, by the way -- and her telling me that I was going to be promoted into the A stream. And, of course, I was so nervous I can still remember standing there and almost wetting myself, just worried sick, not knowing what this interaction was going to be about.

And at that time I was at an Anglican school. And I want you to try to imagine this: my father, a socialist, a follower of Maoism, not religious in the least; my mother, an ardent and practicing Sikh; with a daughter now who is going to an Anglican school where every morning started off with an assembly at the Anglican church that was attached to our school. And not only was their daughter going to this Anglican school, but also she was reading lessons from the Bible and she was taking Bible studies every day for an hour.

And at that time I didn't have a choice. That's just the way it was. And when I was old enough to find out I did have a choice, I asked if we could look at a few other religions and study those, and I was told if I wanted to do that the headmistress would have classes with me on Saturday mornings and we could take a look at some of the other philosophies and other religions that existed. And being an ornery person, even at that age, I thought I'll show you, I'll come in on Saturday mornings just so you can explain some of the other religious philosophies to me.

So I can say that my background is quite eclectic. I still have a mom who practices Sikhism. I married a Catholic. I have a daughter who married somebody from the Presbyterian Church just quite recently. And when it came to her wedding, we had quite a bit of fun trying to imagine how we were going to plan this, this blending not only of cultures but of religious ideology.

She and her husband decided that they wanted to have a Presbyterian ceremony, which was fine, everybody was fine with that. Then I thought I should ask her would she like a Sikh ceremony as well, and I didn't think she would take me up on it and immediately she said, "Of course I would" and she was just so delighted.

So she had three wedding ceremonies, with the same person, by the way. So she had a service at the Presbyterian Church, she wore a traditional outfit and got married at the Sikh temple, and then she had a civil ceremony on my deck and had an outdoor reception, which is the one thing she had always wanted. So it was a coming together of different religions, different cultural practices, but something that is very unique to my family and I would say not so unique to many families and young people we teach in our schools today.

And that is what Canada is about for me. Canada is a nation of immigrants. And, as a nation of immigrants, we've got people in our school system, young people who bring with them a varied background, not only of cultural practices but also of religious practices and even the way families operate and how families function.

And in this perspective, what is the role of public education? Where does "conscience" fit into the public education domain? And to me I want to phrase it a little bit differently, and I want us to take a look at it from the idea of citizenship because a major component of any public education system has to be its emphasis on educating our young people for citizenship in a greater community, citizenship within the school system but also citizenship once they leave the school system and even while they're in the school system out into their communities.

I know, for example, my citizenship training was started off by Lady Ponsoby-Duck at a very, very early age. At the age of 12 she had us out there doing Meals On Wheels. And by the time I was 14 I was reading at the local hospital to little children, or what she did was she had -- she used to call us "her girls"; by the way, I went to an all girls school as well -- and she would have "her girls" adopt senior citizens in the community, and we all would go and we would read, we would take them shopping, we would help them cook, or sometimes just go and sit and chat after school.

And so from a very early age through this Lady Ponsoby-Duck, I learned that there was more to education than learning how to read and write. There was that sense of social responsibility that comes as well. And I was fortunate enough that I had that from my parents as well. My father always had quite a commitment to doing work out in the community as well.

And when I look at our education system today, with all the changes that have occurred in our society, I would say that it becomes imperative that we not forget the citizenship component of what public education is all about. No matter what color, what religion, or what creed, or what kind of backgrounds all of us come from we have to exist in a society we call Canada.

And we have certain citizenship rules for what society defines as a good and responsible citizen and within that in our schools we also focus on individual rights. You hear about the individual educational plans, you hear about individual differences. Yes, all of those have to be accommodated within education, but there is a greater picture out there of the

public good. And public good, in my opinion, cannot take second place to individual rights when you live in a collective.

History has taught us that unless we have some kind of organized government, and I know from listening to the American election organized government doesn't always play out the way it should, but in society we are governed in a democratic way through an election system and through voting, et cetera. We elect our government, and the government makes a move, and that role gives us some order. Without some form of government you have anarchy.

In the same way, for us to exist as a society and coexist with our friends and neighbours we need rules and those rules are provided for us by government. And one of the ones I always focussed in on was if we didn't know when there was a red light we're supposed to stop; can you imagine what traffic would be like on a major highway? There are these rules made for a reason.

Now, when you take it into the school system, yes, there is the stress on meeting individual student needs, developing educational plans, but we all know that those are confined by budgetary constraints because those determine how much individualization takes place.

But at the end of the day rules and regulations govern even a school, which is a microcosm, and if we don't function within them, once again you have anarchy. So we teach responsibility to our young people, and we learn from them too, and all of that happens within a framework.

Now, one of the questions I was asked to address in my opening was the role of the collective agreement. How does the individual teacher, the right to practice their conscience, fit into the collective agreement? As you know -- and I'm assuming a lot of you are teachers, but for those of you who are not teachers -- in order to teach in BC in the public school, you have to belong to a local union and to the BC Teachers' Federation.

That's just that.

Now, there are some circumstances, and I always like to give this disclaimer, where there are extreme situations. For example, in Nanaimo, when we first certified and became a union, there were two people who were given an exemption at that time -- and that existed because of their own religious grounds -- from having to be a member because at that time certification was considered it would be an incredible hardship for them to give up their career because in Nanaimo you had to be part of the union in order to teach. Most of the locals are like that now.

And we have a very democratic union. If any of you have ever been to our general meeting, annual general meetings, we may not always like the results. I can tell you I don't always like the results. But I can say one thing: issues are debated at length, ad

nauseam sometimes. I can remember being at annual general meetings that went on till midnight where people were debating issues.

People hear different perspectives, and then voting takes place to determine policies and constitutional changes. Then those policies and the constitution that is encaptured in our policy guidebook guides our actions and that also give guidance to our teachers in the profession.

One of the questions is, well, if as an individual teacher you feel that it's against your beliefs, for example, to withdraw your services and the union takes a vote and the vote is to go on strike, then do you have an exemption from our own code of ethics because of your conscience to go in and work? I would argue not because when you became part of a collective you not only get the rights of the collective, you also get the responsibilities of the collective. It's not a popular answer with everyone, but that's just the way it is, and I don't mean to say that harshly. But I always say to teachers, "You cannot pick and choose the bits of the collective agreement you like and pick and choose the bits you don't like. It's a package. And that collective agreement was arrived at as a result of negotiation and lots of compromises and that's what governs us."

So, as an individual, if a collective action is going to be taking place, can you just say, "Well, I'm sorry, it's against my conscience and I maybe have to go in," I would say no because in that case that issue would be pursued through our own code of ethics and through the judicial council.

In the same way with curriculum. If there is a ministry mandated curriculum, we have a lot of professional autonomy in how we deliver that curriculum, and I think we need to celebrate that. We also have curriculum that has huge breadth and depth. But can I as a counselor sitting in a counseling room, because of my own personal position on issues, deny a student access to information that they have a right to have? Absolutely not. And our own policies and guidelines take that into consideration.

We represent over 46,000 teachers, that's easily said, and getting 46,000 individual teachers to agree to policies one by one would be almost impossible. So we have structures whereby we have local unions, we have provincial representative assembly -- I'm not going to go into your local structure because I'm sure they mirror the federation ones. We have the representative assembly wherein we have representation by population to a decision-making body. And then we have our annual general meeting. And during the year you have an openly elected eleven executive members who sit and make decisions in-between those other times.

And I want to pose this, really, that when we talk about conscience immediately the thing is people get into camps, you must be over there, I must be over there, and you must be way over there. And I would say there are no camps in this, there is a continuum.

And one of the most important things to do in our community and our society is to carry on with an open dialogue so we understand where we come from. And we all have an

opportunity, through the teachers' union anyway, of trying to change policy. Now, we're not always going to agree on everything. I can tell you I have rarely been to an AGM where I've managed to persuade everyone in that room to agree with me on anything. We're not always going to agree.

The critical factor is that we allow for our differences, we allow for our diversity, we listen to each other with respect, and as my grandmother used to say, "We have to agree to disagree without becoming disagreeable in the process." And what often happens is we become focussed on groups and, therefore, some isolationism takes place, or we become focussed on individuals and I think something terrible happens, we stop listening to what that person has to say.

I think we have to keep our ears open, we have to listen to each other, and within the BC Teachers' Federation we have to use our democratic processes. And if things don't go our way, it doesn't mean we have to quit, it means we keep working for the change that we think is important.

And I know that each and every one of you is committed to quality public education for our young people in a world where they feel safe, where they feel welcomed, and where they feel that, yes, they are individuals but they also have some responsibility as citizens in a greater society. Thank you.

JINNY SIMS FOLLOW UP

I can remember being in a philosophy class my first year of university and a lot of the esoteric discussions occurring then, and I have the same reaction to them now. And when I hear terms like "our diversity is being tested," it's absolutely true, but I look back on history and I say when was it not tested, really.

And for Canada, it's not unique just for Canada. I look at what happened to Britain, what happened in Britain with the influx of people from different countries with different faiths, with different religions, but also a change that occurred in society through evolutionary measure as well because society changes, society isn't static.

And I think one of the things I want us to think about for a few minutes is schools. We always talk about schools as dealing with individuals, but schools are an institution. How can you have an institution that has 1600 bodies in it and every single person's individual needs are going to be met? At times they're not going to be met.

And accommodation, whenever I hear the term accommodation, I don't think we should run away from it. Society, living in a society in a collective is accommodation. When you have your interactions with your family members, never mind going out into your larger families, there are accommodations made there.

Now, one of the questions that were raised was sort of oppression in a velvet glove. Oppression has been around for a long, long time, and we're not going to get rid of it tonight, although I wish we could. And oppression from which perspective?

So when we're looking at the full spectrum of society, whether we're looking at issues that impact on young girls or the performance of boys in the public education system, or whether we talk about some of the CAPP curriculum and some of the contents of that curriculum, and whether we talk about the counselor's right or the counselor's ability to be able to provide information to young people on issues like birth control, on issues like dealing with the different options that are available when a young lady, for example, ends up in my counseling room and says, "I'm pregnant," what is the role of the individual counselor?

As a counselor do I have the right then in that place to say, "This is what you have to do because this is the only morally right thing to do. You don't have any choices"? I would say I do not have that right because what is right for me may not be right for you and may not be right for that young person. But what I do have a right to do and a responsibility to do is to point out all the options open to that young person and point them towards people they can talk to so that they can make an informed decision.

Do I as an individual teacher say, "Well, I can't do this job of counseling because I just absolutely cannot put forward all the options to a young person in that area"? I would say then, for me, I would have some choices to make as to whether I want to stay in teaching or not because in that public arena, in that public education system, we cannot have my personally held beliefs overriding the rights of the individual to certain types of information, and I think that is really critical.

But always going back to the same thing again, I think we have to listen to each other, we have to make accommodations we can, and we have to accept where we have differences of opinion and different positions but manage to have our dialogue and manage to disagree without personalizing and without becoming disagreeable. This debate isn't going to end here tonight, and I'm sure there's not going to be any final kind of a resolution that this group will be able to come up with because it's an age-old one. It's an age-old one.

At the age of 92 my grandmother was asking some of these questions, some of the questions that are being asked here today, and was asking me questions like, "Well, how do you accommodate the fact that one day you can get dressed up and go to the Sikh temple and feel quite comfortable there and another day put on a hat and go to the Catholic church?" I could, and I could do it in all honesty because I felt just as comfortable in whichever arena I was in because it's human spirituality that I was connected with.

And when you look at the religions of the world and you study them, there is far more in common than there is in disparity, than there are differences, and I think we have to really focus on the similarities instead of on all the differences all the time in order to have a dialogue where we can have a level field and then within that knowing that there are some differences, they're unique, and accept them. Thank you.