

## INTERVENTION OF CONSTANT VAN CROMBRUGGHE AT THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF 1830: 24TH. DECEMBER

Gentlemen, just as we desire the freedom of worship and of the press, we also desire the freedom of education: today one cannot exist without the other. It is the deprivation of that freedom, Gentlemen, which has given rise to such a clamour amongst all levels of society, whatever their opinions might have been about other difficulties of the times. It is to regain those freedoms that those of our honourable colleagues who sat on the States General so often gave voice; their energetic perseverance and the strength of their arguments eventually frightened despotism, and, since before our total deliverance, they forced it, trembling, to retreat

Certain speakers, whose doctrine is certainly not very liberal, wished for restrictions on religious liberty, for fear perhaps that the Jesuits would take control of public education; tomorrow they will fear that the Jesuits, the priests or the Catholics (words which are synonymous for some) will take control of public opinion through the press; they seek to prove the necessity of muzzling this instrument of publicity and demand its censure. That, Gentlemen, is where one can get to by taking a misguided position or relying on fears and prejudices. It was to prevent evil; it was, to use the language of a previous time, to avoid the influence of the Jesuits, that in 1825 so many fine educational establishments were destroyed, thereby forcing parents in our Catholic provinces to seek schools for their children abroad.

It was, under no less frivolous pretexts, that under the name of the "Philosophical College" that the former general seminary at Louvain was re-established and all other seminaries were pitilessly suppressed all over our former Kingdom of the Netherlands. Let us profit from the lessons of the past and be on our guard against such powerful expressions of prudence, order, or public good.

By reclaiming the freedom of education, by demanding for families the quality which is guaranteed by competition, the free right of the father to choose into whose hands he wishes to confide his son's future, what are we asking except to allow parents to exercise a natural prerogative, an inalienable right which has seldom been argued except by a Julian the Apostate, a Robespierre, a Van Maanen.

We are in fear of abuse, and it is against this abuse that we wish to pre-arm ourselves, but is there any divine gift which man does not abuse? He will, therefore, also abuse the freedom of education just as he will abuse that of the press. Is that abuse a sufficient justification for shackling the press and surrounding education with a network of preventative measures? That is what the former government wished to do, because it had sworn to enslave the Belgians: but a Belgian is incapable of such enslavement; he will smash the shameful chains forged for him. In the Provincial Estates, M. de Baillet let the calm and male voice of reason be heard; in the Second Chamber Messrs de Sécus, de Gerlache, Le Hon. de Stassart and many other enlightened friends of their country made clear the pressing need that the nation has of free education. You have the joy of having in your midst these worthy men whose eloquent words you will remember all the more clearly. All they have been calling for has been the freedom of education, and the entire nation repeats today the same demand.

How is it that in spite of this unity of mind and heart the word supervision, this hypocritically restricting measure, has insinuated itself into the this article of our central section? How can it be reconciled with the notion of freedom? We want no restrictive measure; well, Gentlemen, what else is supervision? It is difficult: it seems to me to produce a most palpable contradiction.

Whatever else, I am convinced that the supervision which is being proposed will have no other effect than to frighten, to torture consciences, to prevent the establishment of good schools and to prolong the ignorance of a people that loves instruction but who would go without it rather than to see it imposed on them by the administration and at the whim of the civil power.

The honourable previous speaker has proved to us, strongly and at length, the need for education: we all agree on that point. He has spread out before us the advantages of knowledge and the evils of ignorance. All of us, without exception, share these very sentiments. But no-one, I believe, can have concluded from that the need for the government to monopolise public instruction; that conclusion, I am certain, would not have come to the mind of any Belgian. On this point our logic differs somewhat from that of M. Dams. Over and above his extraordinary conclusion, I have to make the Assembly aware that some inaccuracies, which struck me forcibly, have entered into the honourable gentleman's speech. It is not true that the number of pupils in educational establishments has diminished since our political rebirth. It seems to me that this would be easy to prove for intermediate education; we know of the fate of our Colleges between 1825 and 1830. I will restrict myself to replying to him that primary education was in a pitiable state, that most of the schools in Flanders have been empty since a hateful monopoly imposed on them its weak protection. The truth of what I say is recognised by everybody, and I think I would be wasting the time of Congress if I were to present proofs. I will, however, ask if I might present one sole example.

Under the supervision of an inspector the school of a large community near Gent (Sommergem) had, only a few months ago, less than ten pupils. As soon as supervision was abolished, more than seven hundred children were crowding into the community's schools. Would supervision be exercised over opinions and doctrines? In that case, what of article 10 which guarantees their freedom? Would it be exercised over methods? What progress would knowledge make if it were to be restrained by ministerial rules, a veritable Procrustian bed? Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, Volta and many others who have expanded the sphere of human knowledge, would they have formed their pupils if they had not been free to move out of a circle drawn for them by the timid hand of an inspector? Will supervision be exercised over morals? We all know very well that this would be impossible to achieve, and it would be pointless to set out reasons and supporting facts. But, Gentlemen, supervision does exist: clear-seeing, assiduous, concerned and strong; it is the supervision exercised by fathers of families which alone can ward off the problems which we fear. If a teacher is badly informed, if he retains discredited and vicious methods, the number of his pupils will soon be reduced; if he has no moral standpoint, his deserted school will serve as a warning for those parents who might have thought of confiding the education of their children to him. A knowledgeable and virtuous master, whom the freedom of education would allow to establish himself in the same spot, would soon see himself respected and trusted, and the number of his pupils would be the reward of his zeal and his knowledge. Competition will set rid of all these problems; supervision by the government cannot, and it is almost always hateful to people who are even forced to pay for it through the sweat of their own brow.

The honourable proposer of your central section has spoken of passive supervision: if, as I believe to be the case, he means that the government will keep an eye on the conduct of the teachers and will severely punish any offences of which they might be guilty, it is clear, Gentlemen, that the honourable member is of our opinion, and that he will vote with us for the suppression of the word which has so rightly led to such grave fears.

That the courts should punish those misdemeanours which occur within education, we agree. But nothing more; no preventative measures; we will reject them with all our strength.