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# Contentious separate school issue effective

By Scott White  
The Canadian Press

TORONTO — The hallowed halls of the Ontario legislature have seen a lot of changes over the last 12 months, but one of the most remarkable is the metamorphosis of Sean Conway from a boisterous and sometimes obnoxious opposition critic to a staid and reticent minister of the Crown.

Throughout his 10-year political career, Conway has been called everything from the Prince of Wails to the Premier In Waiting, but these days he's known simply as the Minister for Separate Schools.

Providing equal government funding to all grades of Roman Catholic high schools is one of the most contentious issues in Ontario's history and assuming responsibility for a controversy that's older than the province itself has effectively put a muzzle on the usually glib Conway.

"I came to this job at a time when there was one very significant and sensitive issue about which there was a lot of strong feelings," says Ontario's new education minister.

"I like to think one of the reasons I might have been chosen for the task is that, despite all the rhetoric, I am a careful and cautious individual."

However, he quickly adds: "It is true that on occasion I have found the discipline of office a taxing one, a personally taxing one."

Oratory is a dying art in politics, but Conway's quick wit and his way with words makes him one of the best speakers in the Ontario assembly. Since the Liberals have assumed power, Conway has used his verbal skills to become a master of circumlocution — especially when asked tough questions.

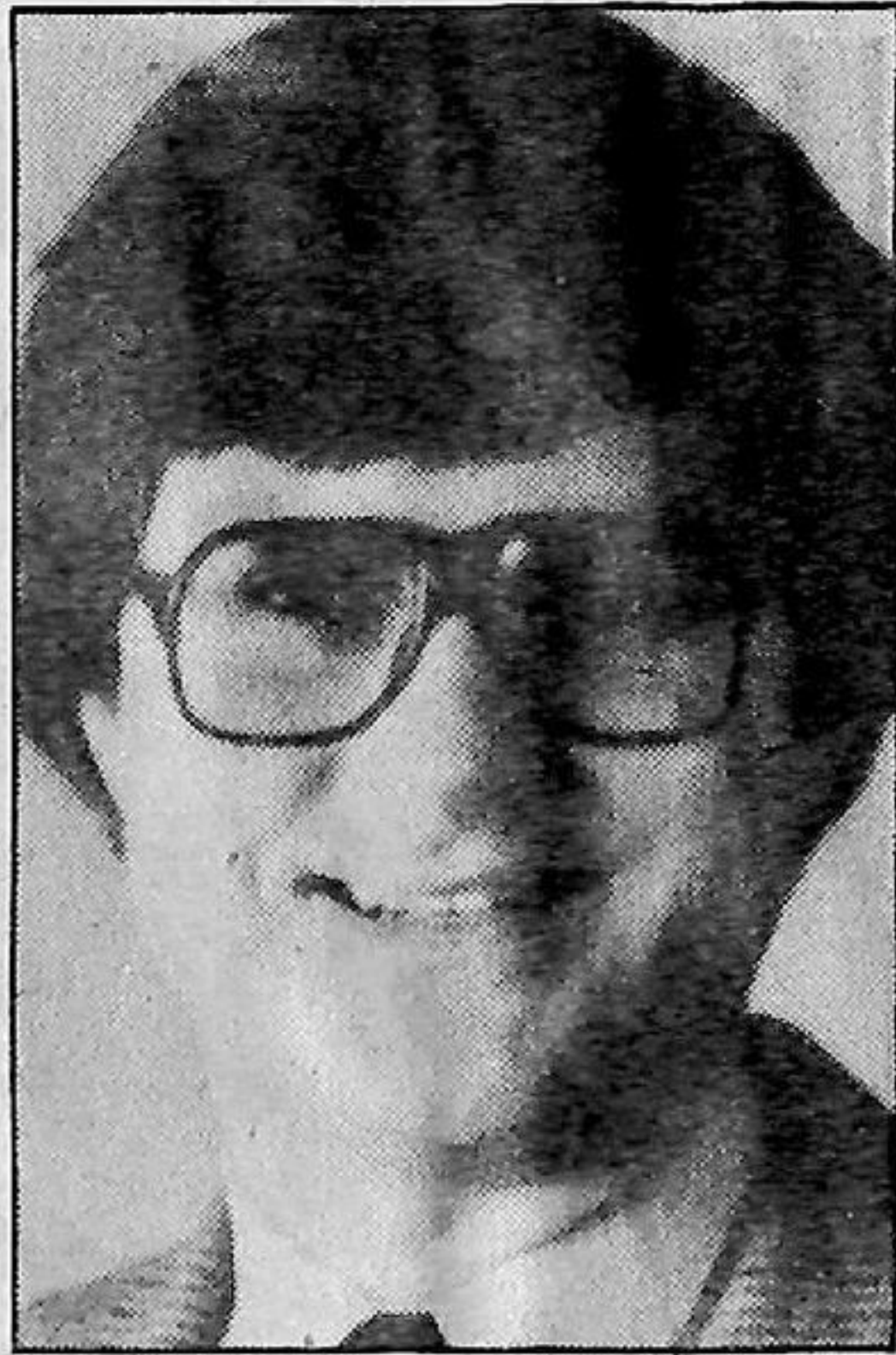
"He can talk a lot and say very little," says NDP education critic Richard Allen. "He's the master of generalizations without conveying any information at all to you and that's going to continue to be his style."

Conservative critic Bill Davis says Conway is so bad that he even avoids "very innocent questions that I think he could answer."

Conway's style is certainly different than Bette Stephenson's, the fiery education minister in the former Conservative government of William Davis.

"I have a lot of respect for Dr. Stephenson, but I really felt her attitude of confrontation hurt the partnership that was so important between the ministry and the educational community out there in the province.

"There was an exhaustion on both sides after the Stephenson era had ended. I think there's a genuine need for a more relaxed relationship because the war of words and the levels of tension



Sean Conway  
'Sensitive issue'

just couldn't go on. I like to think my approach is one of good feeling, consultation, consensus. That's not to say we're not going to differ."

When Conway was the Liberal colleges and universities critic, the two politicians engaged in some memorable exchanges. He liked to call her the "Czarina of Education" and she dubbed him the "Prince of Wails."

(Unfortunately, a lengthy illness has kept Stephenson away from most of the current session of the legislature so she and Conway have had little chance to renew their battle.)

Personalities aside, Conway and the Liberals have taken a different approach to the Education Ministry than the Conservatives did.

The Colleges and Universities portfolio was given to another minister. That allows Conway to devote his full attention to the separate school matter, but he says it's not the only issue.

Last week, he announced a \$13-million program for co-operative education that will provide high school students with on-the-job training. And last month, the Liberals brought in their plan to improve francophone representation on local school boards.

Tory critic Davis says Conway is an "articulate, intelligent and compassionate individual... but he doesn't have a tremendous grip upon the whole education scene." Conway's biggest failure so far, says Davis, was to allow a strike by high school teachers in the Guelph area go on for three months.

Conway, who grew up in the Ottawa Valley town of Barry's Bay and attended Catholic school until Grade 10 before shifting to the public system, says one of his next priorities is to provide more money for rural school boards.

"One of my concerns as a private member was the sense that, with some documented evidence, smaller schools and school districts in rural and northern Ontario were increasingly hard pressed to provide a quality of education-



Bette Stephenson  
Some memorable exchanges

al opportunity vis a vis those in the urban south."

His extensive political experience seem to belie the fact that Conway is only 34 years old. But he literally has politics in his blood — his grandfather, Thomas Murray, was a Liberal member from 1925-45.

After earning his masters degree in history at Queen's University, Conway suddenly found himself nominated, at age 23, as the Liberal candidate for the then

Conservative stronghold of Renfrew North. He won the 1975 election by less than 200 votes. By last spring's election, he had increased his plurality to over 7,000.

When it became apparent after the last election that the New Democrats would be willing to support a minority Liberal government, David Peterson put Conway on his negotiating team. And once an agreement was reached, Conway played an important role in helping Peterson put together the first Liberal cabinet to rule Ontario in 42 years.

As a student of history, those few weeks were among the most enjoyable in Conway's career.

"There were very few people who could remember a time when this province was governed by anything other than a Conservative party and there was a sense that the dynasty was going to go on forever. And quite frankly, some of us in the opposition began to think in our unhappier moments in the last decade that maybe we were destined to be in opposition forever.

"To have been part of the bringing about that change was an enormously good feeling."

Conway has always vowed that he would not become a career politician — even though he has

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no other career. He is often touted as an obvious successor to Peterson, but Conway says he has no intentions of becoming leader of the party and premier.

His future plans call for a return to university, this time as a teacher, where he could perhaps write a book on politics.

"This new opportunity in gov-

ernment has been absolutely wonderful and I'm enjoying it immensely. It's a lot of new work and an important responsibility that I take seriously and I do want to leave my mark.

"But I believe even more strongly now than I did a few years ago that there's a time to come and a time to go."