

Law secures Catholic high school funds

By John Valorzi
The Canadian Press

TORONTO — With little fanfare, the Ontario legislature Monday passed into law the controversial bill extending full public grants to Catholic high schools.

By a near unanimous vote — only Carleton-Grenville Tory Norm Sterling opposed Bill 30 — all three parties supported third and final reading of the legislation.

The decision comes more than two years after then-premier Bill Davis shocked the province by reversing longstanding Conservative policy and announcing full-funding plans.

The bill was signed into law by Lt.-Gov. Lincoln Alexander shortly after the vote.

Education Minister Sean Conway, who introduced Bill 30 within weeks of taking office last summer, called the vote "an historic and important chapter in Ontario history."

"This is an important chapter that has dominated the debate of this province over the

19th and 20th century, and I look forward to the 21st century with much excitement and optimism," he told reporters outside the house.

Government House Leader Robert Nixon, who struck an all-party agreement to pass the bill in one day, noted the legislation ends a debate that has raged in Ontario for more than a century.

"This is a great day and as a former Methodist, there is only one word that occurs to me and that's hallelujah," he said.

Tory Leader Larry Grossman and NDP Leader Bob Rae also welcomed the bill's passing, but challenged the government to move boldly now that it is law to concentrate on improving both the public and Catholic school systems.

Grossman said the province must turn its attention to "reinforcement" of the public system, while Rae said ways must be found to ensure students stay in school and receive the best educational opportunities.

"The thrust of our work from now on will

be to ensure we have two public-funded systems that are not only the best in Canada, but also the best in the world in terms of providing opportunity for all our children," the NDP leader said.

But Sterling, who saw a package of amendments he proposed to Bill 30 defeated earlier in the day, warned that the bill will perpetuate discrimination in Ontario's education system.

"I believe, Mr. Speaker, this piece of legislation perpetuates and encourages the existence of different classes of people, and even worse, different classes of children," he said in a speech shortly before the vote.

"To vote for Bill 30 in my view is to vote for discrimination which Ontario society should not tolerate. To vote for Bill 30 is to vote for a division of our society on religious grounds ... to vote against everything I be-

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Highlights of the new act

- Public money is extended to grades 11, 12 and 13 in Catholic schools.
- Public-school employees whose jobs become redundant within 10 years are to get comparable jobs in the Catholic-school system regardless of their religion.
- Within 10 years, Catholic school boards must scrap discriminatory hiring practices favoring Catholic candidates.
- Catholic boards won't have the right to deny access to non-Catholic students.
- Non-Catholic students in separate schools must be given an automatic exemption from religious studies on the request of a parent.
- A mediator will be appointed by the province to resolve disputes between Catholic and public school boards over transfers of school buildings.
- No community which has only one public high school will lose it as a result of the extension of full funding.

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