

CMEC hard-sells government policies but finds no buyers



by Alec Bruce

When Roger Gaudry, former rector of the Université de Montréal, at a banquet in Toronto this past October 20 informed 400 Canadian educators and students that "the true democratization of higher education consists in making teaching available only to those who have the intellectual qualities, the preparation and the motivation needed to work profitably in the domain," he knew he'd embarked on perilous ground.

"I will say things," Gaudry began, "that will displease faculty members, students, university administrators and even governments which finance institutions." In short, Gaudry was prepared to offend nearly everyone in his audience.

"It will be necessary to be firm," said Gaudry, "and close university departments, institutes and research centres that do not meet real needs, or whose quality is mediocre." He insisted "universities shouldn't accept students who are ill-prepared or poorly motivated to succeed in really high level courses," and called for "an attack on the problem of tenure...whereby tenure is given back its academic meaning, guaranteeing the greatest freedom only to professors and researchers with very high intellectual abilities."

Pointing to hard times on the horizon, Gaudry stressed governments and universities must join in their efforts to make higher education in Canada affordable and exceptional. "In order to plan effectively for the future," said Gaudry, "institutions must know fairly from governments what resources will be available in the years ahead. Also, governments must accept the objective of academic quality institutions maintain. In the present economic context, the goals of universities and governments must be compatible."

Gaudry lectured his audience with calculated aplomb. He frequently weighed his words to produce an effect, which was largely to infuriate. Over and over he emphasized the value of autocratic administration in Canada's universities. He consistently criticized the current system, incriminating aged professors, mediocre scholars, lazy students and unresponsive governments in licentious activities. Within 15 minutes, he'd urged his audience 12 times to help him "rationalize higher education". Gaudry was like a monk in a monastery, testing the cracks in the

masonry, expecting the walls to cave in.

To organizers of the national Conference on Post-Secondary Education (Oct. 19-22), Gaudry was the perfect after-dinner speaker. The aim of the conference hosted by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), was, after all, consultative. In the words of CMEC Chairman Bette Stephenson, "We planned an exchange of views where prepared papers, dialogue sessions and informal conversations might contribute to better understanding and clearer perspectives of the post-secondary education issues that face us all." Unaffiliated, outspoken and controversial, Gaudry seemed just the man to inspire energetic discussion among the delegates.

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But by the end of the address, provincial ministers were wondering whether Gaudry hadn't been a little too inspiring.

A reasonably tranquil audience had turned into a feverish crowd. Of the original 400 delegates attending, just over 300 remained. The rest, mostly students and teachers, had deserted the banquet hall, angry and disappointed. Tom Sinclair-Faulkner, a faculty observer from Dalhousie University, described the walkout as a staged and organized protest. "When Gaudry talked about sloppy admissions policies in Quebec universities," said Sinclair-Faulkner, "members of the Quebec faculty associations walked out *en bloc*. When, on page six of his 12-page speech, Gaudry outlined his views on what constitutes a good student, the Quebec students all left. At page ten, the English-speaking faculty associations left, and at page 11, English-speaking students followed."

At the very least, Gaudry made good on his promise to "displease" his audience. Vic Catano, president of the Nova Scotia Confederation of University Faculty Associations (NSCUFA), called the speech "silly". John Graham, faculty delegate from Dalhousie, thought Gaudry should have been more discreet when talking about tenure. "Tenure is something hard-won in this country," said Graham. "It's not something to be treated lightly." Université de Montréal professor Marie Bertrand vehemently rejected Gaudry's system of "rationalization". "Gaudry disavows all efforts to democratize universities," said Bertrand, "and we want to protest as loudly as possible...declare ourselves in com-

plete disagreement with Gaudry's views on accessibility to higher education, academic freedom and the openness universities should manifest."

At the very most, Gaudry seriously impeded the aims of the conference. Many delegates questioned the integrity of the provincial ministers. As Tom Sinclair-Faulkner explains, "Students and faculty were generally persuaded Gaudry was simply a mouthpiece for the Education ministers who were flying a trial balloon before taking direct steps to control the universities overtly." Among those who believed a conspiracy was afoot was Vic Catano. "Gaudry's speech was a reflection of the hidden agenda at the conference," said Catano. "It was an attack and it revealed the bureaucrats behind the ministers looking for some way to bring universities under the control of governments."

Looking back at the Gaudry incident and the first national Conference on Post-Secondary Education, we can make some interesting conclusions. First, politicians, academics, candor and controversy do not easily mix - especially at a conference designed to be "consultative". Conferences are events where simple gestures, casual remarks are scrupulously assessed for weight and importance. As it happens, politicians spend most of their time making gestures. Academics, on the other hand, are at pains to interpret only those gestures which concern them. Bringing politicians and academics together to discuss vital issues in post-secondary education is only effective as long as each has their own ground to stand on. Gaudry's controversial speech, cutting to the heart of the most sensitive matters in higher education, was delivered at a predominantly

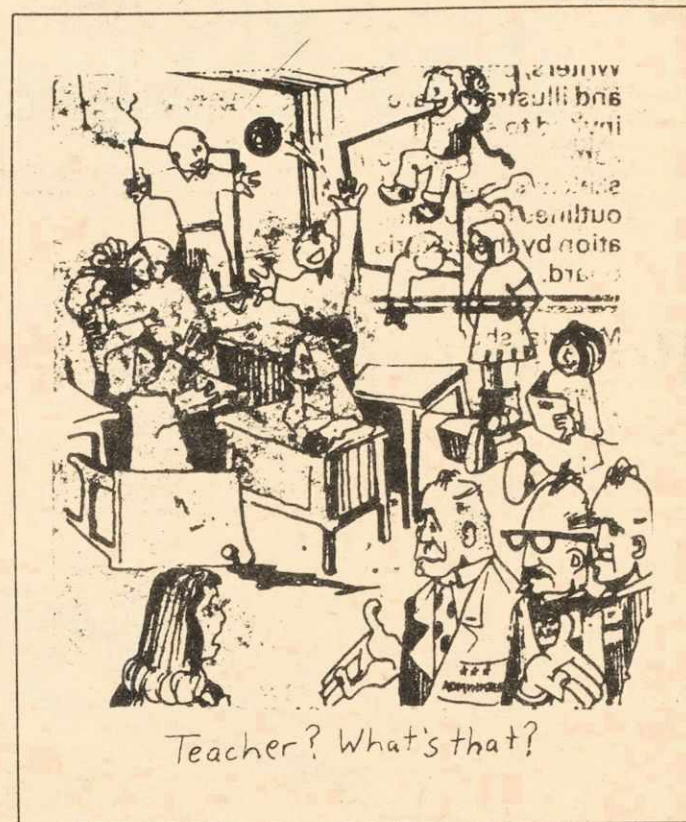
social occasion, preventing any forum for discussion. Secondly, the extent of reaction to Gaudry's "rationalization" plan indicates, rightly or wrongly, how deeply students, faculty members and administrators care about the future of higher education in this country. No other vehicle but Gaudry's speech could so quickly transform a pleasant evening of dining and conversing into a vigil of factionalism and resolution.

It is telling that Gaudry's speech was not the only source of controversy at the conference. Students and faculty delegates were moved to a number of varied protests. Patrick Wesley, executive director of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), said it best: "A conference on post-secondary education must address the real issues, those of real importance. It is clear the

conference was not designed to allow that." John Graham cited the single greatest failure of the conference as "the lack of opportunity for delegates to have any discussion". The Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) launched their own panel discussion called "From the Inside Out" in response to what they thought was a basic reticence of government to allow any free discussion.

Though Gaudry's speech caused the greatest furor at the conference, it did not stand alone in its effects. Strange that an exchange of views so boldly aimed at by conference organizers only served to convince delegates that the ministers were fundamentally unprepared to discuss anything.

Next Week: Part II — CMEC structure and organization; the conference that failed.



ACCESSIBILITY

