

Drugs

Professor Gerald Le Dain is a man whose name can trigger off as much reaction in Canada as Prime Minister Trudeau's. Le Dain is currently being hailed as either an enlightened man of our time or as a pussy-footing academic. After four years of heading the Canadian Commission of Inquiry into the Non-medical Use of Drugs, he is not surprised at this sharp division of opinion about its work and its findings. The conflicting views evoked by the drug issue were constantly in confrontation before his commission during its public hearings.

What has taken him completely by surprise has been the profound effect on his personal views of the spiritual outpourings he witnessed as head of the Commission. He says openly: "I have learnt a lot about myself. I will never be the same again. Now I feel both stimulated and exhausted. Now I want nothing more than getting back to a low-key profile again."

Le Dain was an ideal choice to head the drugs inquiry – a delicate mission which brought about some often touching public confrontations between parents and children on this taboo subject. It is probably not inaccurate to say that no public hearings in recent times have tested the spiritual values of Canadians more thoroughly than the Le Dain Commission's.

A non-smoker and a non-drinker except for the occasional Dubonett to be sociable, Le Dain had been enjoying an attractive, sheltered, academic way of life in what might be called the heart of establishmentarian Canada. He was dean of Osgoode Hall law school in Toronto. But when he agreed to be Chairman of the Commission, Le Dain said in an interview, "all sense of taboo and social revulsion went."

"Trudeau had said, 'we need guidance,' I said 'okay.' But I was staggered. I knew nothing about drugs. Four of the most traumatic years of my life were about to begin."

The appointment meant more or less saying goodbye to a much valued home life with his wife and six children as the Commission began its trek right across Canada. It meant living out of a suitcase, long and exhausting journeys, and conducting hearings from dawn until midnight.

Fortunately, Le Dain has astonishing energy. He has starry good looks – lean and tanned with prematurely silver hair. He

Le Dain drug enquiry has spiritual impact on Le Dain

by Ann Morrow*

is engaging, astute and sensitive to atmosphere. He laughs a lot – mainly at himself. So his appointment was inspired, with his ability to draw out of the most reticent, hung-up teenager revealing facts about drugs. He appealed to the parents, too. They warmed to this sympathetic professor who would understand their problem.

In Ottawa for a few days "tidying up" before returning home to Toronto, where he will be a law professor, having given up the rigours of being Dean, Le Dain talked about the Inquiry.

"I'm always being asked if Canada will be the first country to legalize pot. What am I to say? As a man who doesn't smoke, drink or take drugs, I'm frightened of the unknown potential. For instance, the tobacco experience has been terrifying. We know that it causes lung cancer. We don't know yet with cannabis – so how can you take a decision in a vacuum?"

His opinion, though, on some of the effects of cannabis is one which may have earned him some criticism.

"First let me make it clear that I am not attracted by cannabis. I like to feel good. But I found I was attracted by the values of some of the users and the greater emphasis they offered on being human. Drug use also offered a fuller expression of the emotional side of life with much less dependence on material things. It seemed to spell out the uniqueness of the individual. The message seemed to be 'enjoy your uniqueness'."

When the commissioners arrived in a town, they would contact teachers, clinics, institutions and paste up notices and then wait. Slowly the kids would come forward and talk publicly about drugs. Often there were moving moments when children and parents confronted each other and then broke down in a new understanding. One teenager sought out Le Dain and said: "I

haven't been able to talk to my Ma and Pa for years. If you've only achieved this – it's enough."

Le Dain says, "In terms of achievement the Commission at best has attempted to explain this generation. There was, for the first time, a dialogue and there is nothing more satisfying than making human contact. The temper of the discussions impressed me. I could say to a kid, 'why do you feel you have the burden of the world on your shoulders?' I'd get a straight answer."

"The kids were so open. This was terribly attractive. Their values were right. They were cutting deep. There was no posing. I found this made me develop a belief in openness. Because of this the parents responded, so you had old and young expressing their deepest convictions in public. I remember an old lady who'd come from some outlying place to preach the gospel at a hearing. She thundered on for a while. Then a young hippy said gently: 'yeah, but how much is all this a living reality in your life?' He added, 'you see I find it quite easy to love you'."

"Pow! She just burst into tears and they stood there hugging each other."

The hearings were tentatively received at first but the word soon spread that they were rather special. Le Dain explained: "Wherever we arrived someone would say, 'the nuts from Ottawa are here' and people would come forward. And so often parents and kids would be so grateful to us for the open confrontation. Often a dialogue could go on between mother and son – or daughter – until the early hours of the morning."

"Obviously some people asked to see us privately. Established businessmen and vicars – yes, vicars – could not talk in public about their drug-taking."

Enormous tension

Although such an abstemious man, Le Dain understands the terrible need for drugs, stimulants and tranquillizers today. "We are coping with enormous tension. There is the constant bombardment of the nervous system by noise. Take the kids first. They feel they've got to keep up all the time. The bright kids know where it's at, but these are the super-adaptive ones."

"The others, well they know the park and where the ball game is at but need to get propped up to compete. Eventually they fall out and revolt. In the same way the young executive who has become technologically obsolete turns to alcohol."

*Ann Morrow is a Fleet Street freelance whose stories have appeared in The Times. She recently visited Canada.