

# head on

Let me state at the outset that, despite my grave reservations about the report as a whole, I recognise that the Commission on Educational Planning have asked some important questions, and have presented the people of Alberta with a number of valid concepts. The Worth report contains much that is good; it is to be regretted that its valid ideas are buried in a mass of rhetoric and expressions of simplistic idealism, and that its very format makes this potentially important document largely inaccessible to far too great a number of Albertans.

The Worth report appears to imply (in Section III on Structure, specifically) that the kind of social change which we have come to recognise as necessary can be brought about (or, at the very least, greatly facilitated) by educational measures such as full integration of minority groups into the public school system, preferential resource allocation, and enriched pre-school programmes for "socially deprived" children. As valuable as such measures may, or may not, prove themselves to be, such overemphasis on educational factors fails to give sufficient weight to the political, sociological, economic, and psychological factors operative in the phenomenon of social change. And since, throughout the report, education appears to be viewed not as an end in itself, but as a means to various ends (from job skills to "self-fulfillment" - whatever may be meant by that) it then becomes logical to assume not only that the "under-educated" will be increasingly less able to participate in the social and economic life of our society, but that "life-long education" becomes necessary if one is to be "a partner in the benefits of life in Alberta."

So instead of being instrumental in overcoming some of the inequities present in today's society, such an approach to education - because it inevitably will fail to serve a certain portion of Alberta citizens - seems destined to do quite the opposite: it would tend to increase the rigidity of the present system of social stratification, and to widen the gaps between the strata.

It would seem, then, that social change must precede, rather than being initiated by, a change in the system of education. At best, education - though unable to effect radical social change - can perhaps broaden man's limits of comprehension and thus provide a suitable climate for social change to occur.

Another, and perhaps more dangerous, underlying assumption is the notion that we must "design" the future. The report recognises that "the future is elusive" (p 63) yet insists that to allow the shape of the future to be determined by "the blind, incoherent, sometimes capricious choice" of various groups in society is suicidal (p 29). Instead, it offers the suggestion that "we must look beyond ourselves and our time. We must try to see the future as it could be - then we are able to reason from the future to the present, rather than simply allowing today to become tomorrow." (p 63)

Superficially, this sounds quite logical, and beautifully idealistic. But I have the unhappy feeling that such things are not quite as simple as that; is man, not as an individual but as a member of a social group, really capable of such reasoned flights of imagination, or is he often bound so tightly by his present frame of reference that he can scarcely imagine the future as anything but "more of the same, except, perhaps, a bit better"? If the future is elusive, then our best efforts at careful planning will not have a perceptively greater effect upon the warp and woof of our individual and collective futures than would a deliberately adaptable, flexible approach to coping with a basically unknowable future - and may, indeed, be less successful. It seems risky - more risky, perhaps, than "simply allowing today to become tomorrow" - to base one's detailed planning on the insubstantial quasi-reality of an exercise in human imagination, an educated guess which may have a certain minimum validity but no guarantee of fulfilment.

Certainly we must plan, if only to give us the conviction that we are the masters of our own fate; but choices cannot be made once and for all - they must be made day by day, year by year, as changing values and conditions demand. We must keep the future negotiable.

Doris Windrim

## What's it all Worth?

The wonderful wisdom of Walter Worth and Commission, packaged in glorious graphics available between the insect spray and the pork and beans at your friendly grocery store, is indeed a controversial and disturbing report. What is more disturbing is the criticism it has received. I believe much of this criticism, including that from university personnel, reveals first, a misunderstanding of the nature of the report, and second, a dangerous defensive attitude.

The report of the Commission on Educational Planning is characterized by several basic features:

1. It is positive and optimistic in an age when cynicism (particularly about education) is a disease. Too often critics react to the report with, "It won't work...It costs too much" Such positions are crippling. As the report insists, "optimism supplies the basic energy of society. Pessimism is simply a waste of time." (p.233)

2. The report is value-oriented. All recommendations are based on a vision of what life should be in a person-centered society. As critics of education have pointed out in the past, the university as a bureaucratic structure is a product and supporter of the second-phase industrial society. Therefore, it is not surprising that university personnel tend to resist the report. However, each recommendation in the report must be judged in the context of the humanistic principles upon which it is based.

3. The report is very general. It had to be. Education in Alberta must be considered within the context of broad social problems of existing and future knowledge if education is to be a means to an improved future. Unfortunately, critics have plucked statements out of context and ignored the total perspective of the report. For example, consider the outburst over the report's remark that sabbaticals are often pleasure cruises. In their righteous indignation critics overlooked the fact that the report repeatedly advocates "sabbaticals" for all people in all jobs as part of life long-learning.

For the most part it is all too easy for university personnel to see only as far as the university. For instance it is no doubt wise to reject the report's tendency to relegate the University of Alberta to the role of factory for the labour market. However, this does not negate the validity of the report's charges that the university tends to consider itself elite and aloof. If whilst one disagrees with the Report's solution of "role differentiation", one still must find more valid ways to articulate university activities with other educational institutions and a more successful way of relating to the general community.

4. The report is suggestive, not prescriptive. The Report clearly states (p.42) that it offers not glib cure-alls, but merely suggestions of alternatives. Critics seem to have forgotten this. Is it the label of "government," commission that hampers their memory?

To some extent a hasty, illogical reaction to the Worth Commission is understandable. After all, the report is, in a very real sense, threatening to the individual. It is threatening because it demands new roles and new skills. According to the organization and principles of the Worth Report the professor is no longer a mentor merely by virtue of his credentials. In fact, he must relinquish some of his authority as knowledge-source and decision-maker to community resource personnel, to students, and even to technological devices. He no longer can pursue securely his speciality without reference to other disciplines. He must learn new communication skills and he must learn to function in the membership and autonomous modes. Perhaps most difficult, he no longer must be the passive and neutral model in the classroom, but must have a personalized relationship with the students. Many professors can adapt and are adapting to this comprehensive change. Others fight it out of fear.

Obviously intelligent questioning of the generalisations made in the Worth Commission are necessary. However, it is important that such questioning be motivated, not by vested interests and fear of change, but by a desire to explore alternative ways to design a more humanistic education.

Lois Hammond

