

# Education in Canada's branch plant economy

By MELVILLE WATKINS

We cannot understand what is happening to education in Canada unless we first comprehend the nature of our lives in a branch plant economy.

My own perception of the latter derives largely from my experiences in writing and defending the Watkins Report.

The report needs to be considered apart from its contents if, in McLuhan's terms, we are to get at the real message.

A report commissioned by the government and under its constant surveillance, ended up being disowned by the government. Since it was in fact a rather bland and conventional document, its fate cannot be attributed to its being radical in content. Rather, it was disowned because it exposed the limitations of liberalism—and of Liberalism.

It is hardly news that Canada, as a liberal democracy, is run largely by and for the national bourgeoisie. What makes the Canadian situation somewhat special, however, is the extent to which its bourgeoisie is emasculated.

The business elite of this country has always been timid and colonial-minded, and has provided no base for a viable nationalism.

The rise and fall of Walter Gordon illustrated the limitations of Canadian liberalism; as far as foreign ownership is concerned, apparently no move from complete laissez-faire is to be tolerated. If there remains a case for nationalism, it must be a nationalism of the left, based on economic and social planning—that is, socialism.

The implications of the branch plant situation are pervasive; what is often mistaken for the absence of leadership in Canada is in reality the inability of its leaders to govern.

Historically, the Canadian government emerged to create a national economy separate from that of the United States. But the Canadian economy, patiently assembled around the railway as an extension of the St. Lawrence River, has again become a collection of regional economies, each largely dominated by the U.S.

The capacity of the federal government to effect the rate of economic growth and the level of prices and employment has perhaps never been very great, but it now approaches absolute zero. Understandably, the very existence of a federal government has become increasingly pointless.

The North American economy into which Canada has become imbedded has itself become more and more explicitly a military-industrial complex. American economic growth is highly dependent on military spending, and labor is absorbed by the draft and the war industries. Canada, to its credit, has refused to be fully integrated with the American war machine (though its complicity is substantial); as a result it has had a harder time absorbing the young in the labor market.

Sharp increases in enrolment in post-secondary education have helped somewhat to alleviate this structural problem. In the long-run, however, Canada's ambivalence toward war—its refusal either to fully join the American cause or to find viable alternatives—has meant fewer opportunities for such skilled professionals as engineers and scientists.

The external politics of the branch plant economy tend to be dominated by quiet diplomacy—to minimize tension within the imperial system—and by the mercantilist strategy of seeking special status within the empire.

The recent history of Canadian foreign policy is a tribute to the success with which the Ottawa mandarins have carried out these functions, while locking Canada even more tightly into the continental system.

The efficient functioning of the branch plant society depends also on its producing branch plants intellectuals—people capable of rationalizing the system while having the technical skills needed for its efficient operation. Eventually, even the universities must be Americanized.

John Porter has shown how the Canadian elites systematically neglected higher education in order to remove potential threats to their power. But they failed even to run their branch plants efficiently, much less to create any kind of independent economy with a capacity to generate growth on its own.

The great educational push in Canada in recent years is intended to improve the efficiency of the branch plant economy; it is no accident that major support has come from the Economic Council, itself an emasculated version of the American Council of Economic Advisers, with its research often done by economists otherwise employed by the Canadian-American Committee. As the late Harold Innis observed, the risk of being a social scientist in Canada is that one may die laughing.

Little is to be gained through the mere intellectual exercise of working out an economic policy for Canada. Any technocrat can do that. Carter's reform of the tax system was ingenious, but it was doomed to failure because it viewed economics as a technical exercise independent of politics, and assumed that those in power would legislate against their own interest.

The real issue is not politics in the sense of policy but politics in the sense of politicizing people. The demand for solutions provides jobs for economists to pull rabbits out of hats, when what

is needed is political action. Hence student protests against Dow Chemical's recruiting on Canadian campuses do more to expose the reality of foreign ownership as the intrusion of the U.S. military-industrial complex than could any number of Watkins Reports.

The implications of this for Canadian universities have already been touched on. Both the defenders and critics of the multiversity, from Clark Kerr to Ronald Reagan, agree that the multiversity is a knowledge factory. Canadian universities have not been running their factories efficiently enough, however, and are therefore in the process of being reformed.

New universities have been created and old ones expanded to absorb more students and enable the Canadian participation ratio to approach the American participation ratio. Obsolete requirements have been removed and more choices made available to the student—an appropriate analogy here is either the supermarket or Jean Genet's brothel. The tri-semester system and a longer school year make for a more efficient use of the plant, and keep students out of the job-market in summer. A high priority for graduate studies and the proliferation of research centers and institutes improve working conditions for the faculty (at uncertain costs for undergraduates.) The University of Toronto has become a multiversity at the center of an embryonic University of Ontario, the example of California notwithstanding.

What is to be done? Clearly, the problems of the university are continental before they are national, and national before they are provincial; that ministers of education are provincial should not blind us to these structural realities.

Across the globe, the university has become a battleground to expose the contradictions and the repressiveness of corporate capitalism. Nationally, the university has become the last

bastion from which to insist that Canada regain her independence from the United States.

In the words of John Seely (a former York dean who left in 1963 after a dispute with president Murray Ross and the board of governors over the future of the university):

"If Canada is to be more than a geographical expression, her nationhood will be born in her universities. And if her universities are to discover any merit or mission, then students will educate into that discovery—and salvation."

It is tempting to leave the matter there—though insisting that the issue is not salvation, but survival. But to ask students to shoulder the entire burden is to cop out.

Those of us who are professors should either work to change the universities or leave them to sink into irrelevance. And we should give the students advice based on our own experience of life within the walls. There should be joint student-faculty control of departments—for that is where the power lies—and combined efforts to create an environment centered not on teaching (much less on publishing) but on learning.

If there is any truth at all in the views of Galbraith and others that power is shifting from the capitalists to the technocrats, then no time should be lost in humanizing the universities where technocracy presently thrives. For what is at issue is not simply discovery as a personal possibility, though the liberation of the mind is sufficient to justify action.

The terrible fact of our times is that the technology of the technocrats has created a world out of control, and has made action a prerequisite to sheer survival. To act is to assume a moral risk, but the risk must be taken: the present is intolerable.

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