

# Conversation

## with H. Ian Macdonald

This week, H. Ian Macdonald, President of the university, spoke to *Excalibur's* James Carlisle about present problems and future plans for York. Here are the highlights of that conversation.

**Considering the economic problems and the general anxiety in the institution, would you characterize the general state of York University as healthy or unhealthy?**

The university is basically in a healthy state. The preoccupation which we have with problems and difficulties is a normal one in these abnormal times. The pressure on the individual members of the community, be it on a faculty member or a member of the support staff facing high interest rates and inflation or a student facing high costs and high fees, is very corrosive to the morale of the individual and in turn of the institution. I think always one must stand back and see York as an institution which has had remarkable development in the last 20 years. York has been innovative in its structure and its programmes. It has been highly creative both in the work of individual teachers and researchers and in its administration. One finds that in going across the country or in other parts of the world that people know about York. They know about the achievements of individual people and about whole departments.

This is always a difficult matter to deal with because on the one hand if you say that we are strong and vigorous, someone is going to say that you have your head in the sand. On the other hand, if you say we have a lot of difficulties someone will accuse you of underselling the university.

I think the point is to be realistic. We know what the problems are and we know that it is going to be a difficult road ahead for universities. Ultimately you have to ask yourself two things: First, do you really believe that what you are doing is important and, second, do you believe that you have a strong and effective institution with which to work. Of course I think that in both cases we have and that therefore we will continue to be successful.

**Would you say that the protests against tuition increases are a fruitful exercise?**

I think that the concern is well taken. I think that it is not good enough to have this argument go on in an indefinite way. We have never had a very clear picture of who is going to university, how they got there and so on. This is why I believe, as we expressed recently to the government, that it is very important to get on with the accessibility study. It is very important to have a clear policy on what our expectations are from the university. Does the government think that it is more important to have more people or fewer people attend? If so, what is the basis by which they get there? How are they to be retained in the system? I think, therefore, that the concern about the meaning of the university and about the sense for whom it is there is well taken.

Now the question about whether sit-ins or marches or demonstrations are good or bad public relations is a very difficult one to answer. On balance, I must say that most of the letters and calls or expressions of opinion which I hear from citizens show a little irritation with that kind of thing. They say, "We all have to pay our way these days. We all have to share some of the burden." It is understandable to me why people have to express their frustration and their irritation but I think it is much more important to get the real story. It is more important to find out what the real circumstances are and to go about convincing the public why the universities are important, not just for the individuals but also why these individuals in turn contribute to a better society.

**It has been announced that there will not be any budget cuts to departments next year. What is the purpose of this year without cuts?**

First of all, the universities of the province have gone for about 8 or 9 years now in which income, principally through grants and partly through fees was considerably less than the rate of inflation. The result of that has been to cut back on a whole host of activities, the number of faculty members, the number of support staff and supporting devices. It has tended to increase the number of students in the classroom and so on. Three years ago, we had to cut the base budget by one million dollars within one year. The next year, we had to take out another \$3.4 million and last year \$1.9 million. There is no doubt in my mind that we reached the point where the basic quality of our programmes and the support for them was seriously jeopardized and so we decided that this year the top priority was to have a pause in this



process, to maintain our existing base budget and to set about giving ourselves time to plan the academic future of the university.

**Will this involve a deficit in the budget for next year?**

In order to have this pause, I raised the question of the necessity of some deficit leeway. Of course that is where the student fees question comes in. I felt that although the top priority was to give us a pause in the budget cuts, one couldn't put the whole burden on the backs of the students all at once. My argument to the Board, which was accepted, was not to take the full 10 per cent but only to take half of it. Even doing this involved a deficit of one and a quarter million dollars next year. The board agreed that this was fiscally responsible because we don't have to borrow that. We can finance it through the year internally without borrowing money. But you must have some limits and the board agreed that the cumulative deficit should not be permitted to be more than 1.5 per cent at any time.

**How long will it take to repay that deficit?**

You could carry that deficit indefinitely by going from year to year but of course the catch is that you cannot add to it. What it really means is that the next year, unless there is a major change, the pressure will be much greater upon us and we recognize that and it has been done knowingly.

**Some years ago there was a model on prominent display showing the long-range plan of the university. It showed the twelve colleges, the teaching hospital and other buildings. The model is no longer on display. Has this long range plan been abandoned?**

You are quite right that when York began there was a 'master plan' as it was called, designed when these 660 acres were acquired. The expectation was that this would be an institution of 25 to 30 thousand students and that it would have a faculty of Medicine, a teaching hospital and many other buildings. Of course in 1972-73, there was a freeze on further building but through shared projects and shared resources we have made a little bit of progress here in the last 6 years. We have added the religious centre, through private funds which were given to us earlier and by making our land available we have added the tennis centre and the Metro track and field centre which have supported programmes in physical education.

I must say that I cannot envisage a major move to complete the master plan during my term of office. Given the enrolment outlook particularly I would like to see the completion of Fine Arts Phase III some day because that not only serves that faculty but it would serve the cultural life of the whole community. However, it too is an ambitious and costly project and I think it is a long-term project.

**Is that kind of strategy—affiliation and sharing of resources—the way York will be developed in the future?**

Yes, we have the affiliation with Seneca in the Early Childhood Programme and an additional one which was approved by the Senate the other day. I think that we will have more and more co-operative ventures.

We will be looking very carefully at our land as we did with the Tennis and the Track and Field Centres, with a view to joint ventures which are valid within the terms of the university and also supporting of the community. Now that a community is developing out here I think it would be very nice to try to have other such associations and relationships on the campus and around it to give a more balanced, a more vital and a less isolated academic community.

**One of the problems in the university is that good research requires facilities and facilities require money. There must be a judgment concerning the allocation of very limited funds, we have toward research facilities versus teaching facilities.**

In a way, it really doesn't impose that great a problem because a great deal of research is funded by granting bodies, private foundations and so on. It's true that there are instances in which you can identify a particular choice in the university's budget in which you say that so and so can be relieved from teaching to do more research. Thereby, there is less available teaching. But what is important to do is to recognize that faculty members where their teaching is concerned are the responsibility of the university and we must make sure that we help them and that they help themselves to get as much external funding as possible for their research. Within a few weeks, for example, we will be announcing the appointment within the university of a new Dean of Research to help exactly with that energizing stimulative process.

**Will you be encouraging private enterprise to come onto the campus and employ university researchers, and, of course, to fund them?**

Yes. Within the past year we appointed a research officer whose task is to pay his own salary and to earn more by going out to find where a demand exists for the kind of research skills which we have here. We are looking at the possibility of establishing a York research institute which would become a kind of umbrella for the purpose of marketing the research skills that are in demand externally.

**Would you see this a compromising in any way the concept of the university as a centre of pure research motivated solely by the researcher's curiosity?**

The problem of so-called contract research is often a most difficult one. You don't want the faculty members to be simply doing projects for which there is a market any more than you would want them to spend their time building houses or laying bricks. That becomes the responsibility of the self-disciplining process of the dean and the faculty.

**In the long-term planning of the university, would you say that we are moving away from the concept of funding coming strictly from government grants and more to cooperation with other institutions and other bodies outside?**

There has always been a high degree of private support for university initiatives but right now we will be seeking funds from the private sector to support various university projects. We have a central screening committee at the moment which is looking at proposals coming in from all of the faculties and trying to arrange them in priorities and trying to match those to what we know about external interests. It will not be a matter of private funds replacing the old funding mechanisms, but rather supplementing them.

**Could you give me a prediction of what it's going to be like next year at York during the planning programme?**

We have put ourselves on the line for a very important responsibility. When I went to the board to say why we were recommending a no-cut budget and not taking all of the option involved in the fee increase and also taking on a deficit of one and one quarter million dollars, I accompanied that with a commitment that this university was serious within itself and within its own corporate framework about planning its future, about looking reality in the face and recognizing that we did have some difficult choices to make and we should make them rationally and purposefully. So, I have invested a lot of personal hope in my belief that the university has the capacity through its established bodies, the Senate and the faculty councils to make those determinations and those decisions. I think that we will be working very hard to provoke a lot of good discussion and I hope to provoke a lot of good input across the board from the university this year.

Out of this internal planning process and the external celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the university, I hope that we will generate the momentum necessary to propel us forward into the eighties in a strong and effective way.