

Excalibur interview

Macdonald sees lean years ahead for York

York president H. Ian Macdonald, entering his second year as president of this university, has been a leading spokesman in the Toronto media on economic and university affairs. Excalibur interviewed Mr. Macdonald in his ninth floor offices, Monday.

Q: York University has since its inception been looked upon as in the shadows of the U. of T. How long do you think it will be before York comes of age?

A: The U. of T. is now close to 100 years old and York is but 16 years old. I think the progress York has made in that time is unprecedented in the world.

I also don't think the two universities are similar in character and operations. The size of U. of T. and the weight of the professional faculties, engineering and medicine, and its college system make it conceptually different from York.

Q: How would you rate York in the community of universities around the world?

A: You have to be honest about this, and it would be surprising if York after 16 years had the depth and the breadth of the leading universities of the world. Within Canadian universities, York is pretty well near the top.

Q: People will be voting for a provincial government on the day this interview is published. How would you rate the three major parties on their post-secondary educational policies?

A: I've gone through the last few weeks carrying a silver dollar which I've offered to the first person who could point to me any candidate of any of the parties who has made any public reference to universities. This is a reflection that we are not very far up the ladder of public priorities.

I've never really felt that the election will have any significant effect on universities.

Q: What should government policy be? Should governments be striving for mass education or quality education for an elite?

A: This leads into an important topic because I've been calling for a national conference on the future of education for this very reason.

I don't think as a matter of public policy we have a clear idea of the appropriate goals and objectives of universities today. Should we continue to be concerned with mass education, or are the universities going to revert to a narrower more traditional academic responsibility? Are we going to put more of our resources into general education or into professional training?

I think these are decisions that universities and governments have to discuss between themselves and co-operate on.

I don't think anyone has an answer to this question until we think this question through completely. My own inclination on the matter is towards a general education because there are great difficulties in anticipating the needs of the labour force and the economy of the future.

Q: What is your stand on tuition fees?

A: I think everything must be done to ensure equality of educational opportunities. That is not merely an economic thing. You can have completely free education and still not be assured of equal educational opportunities.

You can have bad teaching, or people in an environment where there is no inducement, or lack of information, which act as discriminating factors.

My first principle is true equality of educational opportunities, and secondly to arrange a financial system to ensure that no-one has been denied an education for financial reasons.

Whether you have to have fee-less education to ensure that, is a debatable point. You can still have fees and make sure you have more adequate student support.

Q: Are universities only serving the establishment by producing lawyers and economists for businesses and governments?

A: I both agree and disagree with that view. The universities still affect a relatively small percentage of the population. The people who go to university, immediately find that the opportunities lie in established positions.

On the other hand, there's nothing that says that any individual has to go into the established fields. The interesting thing to-



H. Ian Macdonald succeeded John Yolton to the position of president of York University on July 1, 1974. Before his acceptance of the York post, Macdonald held various positions in the Ontario government, including chief economist and Deputy

Treasurer and Deputy Minister of Economics and Intergovernmental Affairs. He views the economic situation in Canada as bleak and the years facing Ontario universities as difficult.

day is the urge among graduates and professional people to find work in the non-established fields.

Q: Much has been written lately about the crisis of universities in general, and the crisis in the humanities in particular. Since York has a large humanities department, would you comment on the causes of this loss of confidence in the humanities among professionals and the public.

A: It's always been easier for a person to take the practical route and become a lawyer, or a doctor, or an engineer. This is a label and it's a clearly defined function.

Similarly, it's always been riskier to go into philosophy, English, or the classics in relation to bread and butter terms. The interesting thing is that the non-professional disciplines are not suffering at York.

The enrolment in philosophy and the other humanities is high.

On the other hand, if you go and talk to the public you will find a lot of worry that we're producing university graduates who aren't trained to do anything in particular and who have no job opportunities ahead of them, when they graduate.

Q: In York's submission to the Ontario Council on University Affairs, it was stated that York's answer to the low BIU ratio set by the government of Ontario was to increase enrolment. What is the academic expense of this policy?

A: One of the questions York must answer is — what is our optimum size? At this time the enrolment is quite buoyant which is reassuring in the short term, but as we are not expanding the faculty overall, the individual attention a student receives will diminish.

If that keeps going on, then quality will go down. I don't think we're at that point yet.

Q: Are students who would normally not be accepted being brought into the university for the sake of increasing the number of heads.

A: No. We are adhering to the same standards as before and we are not relaxing those standards for the sake of numbers.

Q: In the same report, it was stated that York would not budget a deficit because you view with alarm the upcoming 1976-77 year. Why is the university pessimistic about next year?

A: Unlike a lot of other universities, York still carries a \$1.6 million accumulative

operating deficit and a \$3.8 million capital deficit. Furthermore, all our projections suggest that expenditure increases are going to continue to be greater than the revenue that is likely to come from the government.

By balancing the budget last year, we are in a much better position than other universities.

Q: The report also states that York may find it necessary to eliminate some services most other North American universities consider 'normal'. What are these services?

A: Well I hope we don't have to do that. If financial trends continue the place you'd find easier to take from is in the support service area. No-one wants to do that and we have not yet reached the point where we would consider such an option.

But I think it's worth discussing to what extent the university should maintain services that are provided by the outside community. For example, should we have a health service when there are public hospitals available?

The other consideration is whether the services should carry deficits, pay for themselves or make a profit.

Q: Other universities have budgeted deficits because they believe that in the end the Ontario government will bail them out. Is this not so?

A: It would, but only at a very great price. I think you would have the government move into the operation of the university.

I'm not completely certain but I believe that as a result of the University of Manitoba's financial troubles, the government of Manitoba is involved very heavily in the internal processes of the university.

So if you really value your autonomy and academic freedom, then you had better do whatever you can to make sure the day doesn't arrive when the government will have to move in.

Q: Employees of the university are being asked to accept lower than competitive pay scales because of this university's budget problems. How real is the danger that York will break down into vested interest groups tangling each other for a bigger slice of the pie?

A: I think it is a worry, since approximately 80 per cent of the university's budget is spent on salaries. I've said from the beginning that our support staff and faculty have fallen behind corresponding

outside workers.

In normal times the average 13 per cent increase in faculty salaries last year would have been highly acceptable, but in our current situation of inflation it is inadequate.

Q: In March, Excalibur published a story on a report by the Council of Ontario Universities which advocated increased student/faculty ratios, decreased course options, and higher tuition fees. How many of these have already occurred at York, if you substitute higher service costs in place of tuition hikes?

A: That report was an investigation of the proposition — what could universities do if the financial situation did not improve? and the things you mentioned were all possible.

We are increasing student/faculty ratios, but I have not seen much evidence of decreased course options. It is true that the parking rates have gone up, and that resident fees have gone up five to 10 per cent and, of course, food generally has gone up.

However, we did not accept a recommendation to increase the fares of our local bus service.

Q: During the summer months you have made several speeches on the economic crisis in the country and in one speech you advocated wages and price controls. Why do you feel these restraints are necessary?

A: My proposition, which is supported by a large number of economists, is that the basic forms of economic organization have changed greatly, and that traditional methods are no longer working and perhaps can no longer work.

We have developed the kind of society in which the expectation for goods and services are running far in excess of the rate of productivity and in the rate of increases in supplies and services.

If that kind of situation continues, we are no longer increasing people's incomes from an enlarging economic pie but merely fighting one another for a larger share of the same pie. That, in my view, becomes a recipe for a social disaster.

Q: What do you think the basic difference will be between York of 1975 and York of 1980?

A: I think we have to make an ultimate decision pretty soon on that point. Until we do, all we can say is that we hope to retain flexibility and avoid becoming just a large rubber-stamp sausage factory.