

By ANDRE PICARD

**T**he CBC's *Journal* loves controversy. They like nothing better than a good verbal brawl between as many points of view as possible. Barbara Frum's eyes light up every time she sees one of her combatants heat-up and lash out against another. She baits them, goads them into losing their diplomatic cool.

Sept. 20 Frum may have been missing, but the style remained the same. A plethora of students and academics were pitted against each other over a new hotly debated book on Canada's post-secondary education system.

*The Great Brain Robbery* consists mainly of three paragons of academic virtue fantasizing about a past that never was and sloughing off the real reasons Canadian universities are on the road to ruin—underfunding, cutbacks, and federal-provincial disputes—and substituting them with unsubstantiated accusations that students and faculty are to blame for government's flawed policies.

"The book is dangerous," says Jean Wright, Canadian Federation of Students researcher, "because it says a lot of things that people want to hear—without justifying them one bit." Buoyed by the names of three of Canada's top historians on the cover, the polemic presents a false air of authority and research. And it's doing brisk sales.

Donald Savage, Canadian Association of University Teachers director, is blunt about his feelings on the book. "Frankly, I think it's unprofessional to release a book with so little research and justify it with the excuse that it's a polemic."

Students and professors from coast-to-coast are echoing these angry condemnations. So why the furor?

Authors J.L. Granatstein, Robert Bothwell and David J. Bercuson have managed to insult almost everyone involved in the education system and have offered a hollow solution to please no one. And if that wasn't enough, their thesis is loaded with inflammatory language and unjustified, exaggerated claims not supported by any data.

The main premise of *The Great Brain Robbery* is Canadian universities passed through a utopian period in the 1940's and 50's and we must return to these golden times immediately if post-secondary institutions are to be saved from ruin.

Nice idea. The only hitch is Shangri-La university never existed, and never will under their dream vision.

The system which the three wish to revive was blatantly sexist and racist—shutting out women, natives and visible minorities and putting quotas on Jews and Japanese Canadians—not to mention primi-



## The Great Brain Robbery

Three professors dream of the good old days that never were

tive and ineffective from an academic view point.

"I was there," recalls Savage, a McGill history professor in the pre-expansion days. "I don't accept for one moment the premise of the book ... the false history and false nostalgia that they use as justification is absurd."

The authors bemoan the demise of squeaky clean (though mythical) Mr. Chips and the cozy classrooms full of brilliant students. "Teachers could get away with murder. There was no accountability whatsoever," recalls Savage. "Look at the scholarship and research that professors were supposed to do—not much."

The CAUT director's most vivid memories of the 50's are "regular and systematic attacks on professors by government, administrators and their colleagues."

This problem was overcome by granting tenure, something *The Great Brain Robbery* claims has been perverted into job security and allowed some academics to "use their podium as a pulpit to preach a particular dogma to susceptible young minds in their classes ... (thus) violating academic freedom."

The book claims teachers' unions have promoted "rough communism," served as a shield for "incompetents" and metamorphosed scholars into "teaching drones." Bothwell, Granatstein and Bercuson imply they have miraculously escaped these evils, yet fail to mention the faculty unions they

loathe have allowed them to go from earning starvation wages to earning a decent living and have fought to restrain sabbaticals so they and their colleagues can publish works, scholarly and otherwise.

But the contempt they have for modern-day scholarship, unions and sabbaticals is nothing compared to their attitude towards students.

The historians vividly describe the 1968 occupation of Sir George Williams (now Concordia University) computer centre by a mob of "militant blacks, white liberals, and socialist revolutionaries." Through a mind-numbing leap of logic, they explain that his "unjustified and criminal assault" by "student guerillas" has ultimately led to watered down entrance requirements, grade inflation and the "misguided notion" that students have rights.

Not only is their analysis of the George Williams incident simplistic and extremely poorly researched, it conveniently fails to mention the students involved were jailed for their actions, thus paying their dues to society, and are now serving in the social services, professoriates, law practices and even the Canadian senate—hardly the fate of most terrorists.

Bercuson, Bothwell and Granatstein give no other examples of student action in this country, peaceful or political. Caught in their time warp and hiding behind their word processors, the trio

leaves readers with nothing but shallow innuendo and guilt by association as their blanket condemnation rolls on.

This attitude pervades their opinions of students too. Time and time again, we are told students are stupider than they were in the glory days of the 50's, but no evidence is used to back up these claims.

"A student who graduates with a B average today would likely have received a C plus 20 years ago," they declare self-righteously, as if we're supposed to take their word for it.

They conveniently overlook course requirements. What were once graduating requirements are now entrance requirements in some programmes, says Donald Savage. "Universities are demanding ever more." The history lessons professor Savage taught graduate students in the 1950's are now basics for second year courses, for example.

"The notion that the last couple of decades has met an appreciable decline (in standards) is nonsense," he says.

More grossly exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims come in the domain of student influence on policy. The authors call for the removal of all student representation from senates, boards and committees because students "instinctively resist," making their work more difficult.

They don't credit students with

having a lot of intelligence, but do give them a lot of credit for political power they simply do not have. The belief that the minor representation students do have on boards and senates will significantly sway administration decisions is sheer paranoia.

Granatstein, Bercuson and Bothwell even want teacher evaluations discontinued, neglecting that an ever-growing number of professors are using their classes' comments for self-improvement.

For a respected labour historian like David Bercuson to put his name on outlandish statements such as democracy leads to "the cancer of student revolt," "too much democracy" is anarchy, "salvation" from democracy is "a strong dose of elitism" and democracy and excellence are diametrically opposed is a sad state of affairs.

The historians attribute large enrolment increases solely on the baby boom, and conclude the perceived drop in students occurring today is a result of the birth control pill.

Firstly, their claim of a drop in enrolment is factually incorrect, as student numbers in Canada grew five per cent this year and thousands of applicants were turned away. Secondly, while the baby boom had a marginal effect, close to 90 per cent of the real increase in numbers can be attributed to the admission of women.

How can professional researchers who decry sub-standard academic publishing overlook other major factors in enrolment increases such as the huge increase in high school graduates and changes in the Canadian economy which brought technological change and the necessity of a university degree to secure career employment.

Unfortunately, the authors use their flawed analysis of enrolment to discuss university funding. They write, "some major changes in the funding sector are necessary," enrolment based funding is a flop and university funding suffers greatly and unnecessarily from federal-provincial bickering on the subject. But again there are no well thought-out alternatives presented and an unforgivable lack of cold, hard facts to back up their statements.

They gloatingly hold up Yale and Harvard as examples of independent institutions which do not rely on hand-to-mouth government funding. But they disregard the Ivy League's five figure tuition fees and the fact that the bulk of American colleges are struggling. Many survive on such dubious forms of revenue as selling television rights for their all-star football teams and selling scientific discoveries to private industry.

The fact is universities are grossly underfunded. It is obvious that making universities even more elitist is not going to solve the underfunding problem, but create even more related difficulty.

The professors call for tuition fees to be raised to \$2000. This

**Brain Robbery can't** page 4