

Dale Ritch: a retrospective

From skinny eighteen year old to campus revolutionary

Once upon a time, York's recently resigned student president drank with engineers and danced with phys-ed majors -- what a long, long way he's come

By PAUL STUART

When Dale Ritch resigned as CYSF president last week, one of York's last links with the student movement of the 60s fell away.

The man himself, though saddened in the wake of the ULS's electoral debacle, is about to begin a new kind of life and he felt like talking.

So late last Friday morning, off we walked to the gentle light of the Ainger where Ritch, hunched forward and resting his elbows on a smooth plywood table, told of how he became what he is and what he believes will become of him in the years ahead.

WINTER AND SPRING

At twenty-seven, Dale Ritch has been a committed revolutionary for the past four and a half years and his ideology is no more separable from the man than winter is from spring.

Which is not to say that he has lived the kind of life that can be summarized neatly on the back of a political pamphlet.

He grew up in a little suburb called Woodview Heights, three miles from York. In September 1967, the skinny, eighteen year old red-headed enrolled at the University of Toronto as, of all things, an engineering student.

When the engineering boys pelted anti-war demonstrators with snowballs Ritch took no part. But he remembers, "my sympathies were vaguely with the engineers".

In February, 1968 he dropped out when the deadline rolled around.

SOUL SEARCHING

"This was," he reflected while sipping a tea, "the first time I'd ever begun to question the course my life had been taking. I was disillusioned with the whole process of getting ahead in the world and I realized that engineering was the last thing I wanted to do in life."

The young college drop-out got a job in the efficiency department of DeHavilland Aircraft Corp.

"It was a horrible place to work," he remarked. "All of them were spying on the workers and on each other. It really soured me on the system."

Soon ("without knowing anything about politics"), he joined a Trotskyist outfit called the Young Socialists. He did some anti-war work, but remembers it as "more of a lark than anything else."

SELF-DISCIPLINE

He was by no means born the self-disciplined fellow he is today.

"I rented a house near Casa Loma with a couple of phys-ed majors and I got into the university social routine. My life turned into a twelve-month party, which involved exploring the counter-culture towards the end.

"I got into Zen and read the idealist philosophers and I experimented with hallucinogenic drugs," he said.

"But I found drugs offered no permanent satisfaction, that the insights they offered were very artificial and contrived. I realized that the main problem in the world was not my interpretation of it, but the way it really was.

"The main problem in the world was capitalism."

By late 1969 the party was pretty well over and Ritch wanted to travel. He dropped out of the YS and hit the road for five months, headed for Vancouver and Mexico. It was in Mexico that he "became acquainted first-hand with imperialism, poverty and degradation."

He returned in 1970 to a life of hard work in the mines of Sudbury. He recalls his experience there with satisfaction.

"It was hard but it was edifying because I proved to myself that I could work as hard as anybody else.

"And I came to understand that the miners are the most conscientious of Canadian workers. It was a real honour for me to work with them."

A year in the mines preceded nearly another year of tough, dirty labour in meat-packing and rough construction carpentry. Clearly, Ritch has had occasion for laughter, when he has heard conservative political opponents and commentators prating about "coddled student radicals."

CHANGE THE WORLD

He began to say that only the working-class can change the world, that the "best elements" of the 60s radicalization knew this as did the "current wave of radicals".

Asked if, in the 1970s, it is really possible to talk of a "wave" of radicals, he replied, "Numerically the left is as strong as it was in 1969, at the end of the last wave of radicalization. Today's wave is more thorough-going, affecting a broader cross-section of people. And it's more firmly rooted in the students than was that of late 60s."

When Ritch finished this stretch of hard labour, it was 1971 and he was ready to go back to school and political involvement. He once told me that for the previous three years a debate was going on in his head concerning the possibility of genuine political communication. For a long time he had thought that activism "was just an ego trip". He resolved the debate when he decided that he ought to simply present his case and let people make up their own minds.

Those who have seen him only in heated partisan debate might scoff at this, but, like many radicals, Ritch is a different person, backstage. He does not preach and is more interested in working with people than in converting them to his own beliefs.

THE COLD HALLS

At York, he began the life which had him roaming these cold halls until, after three campaigns, he was finally elected CYSF president. Harrassing some "demagogue" in the bearpit at noon; arguing about Vietnam at the literature table at 1; putting up posters about Chile at 2; attending a com-



CYSF president Ritch amid flowers and files.

mittee meeting at 3; rapping about politics with anyone who was around for a couple of hours in the late afternoon — and then, downtown for a socialist forum in the evening.

While the years came and went.

His association with the Young Socialists came to an end in 1973. The YS and its parent group, the League for Socialist Action, were fraught with internal wrangling over the issues of support for the NDP and Canadian nationalism.

Ritch's faction favoured critical but unconditional support for the NDP and saw nationalism as a progressive force in Canada. They were in a minority, and the differences could not be reconciled.

"So," said Ritch, "we decided to pull out and without fanfare, form a new organization, the Socialist League. We consider ourselves to be carrying on in the real traditions of Trotskyism."

The SLers and everybody else in the ULS, were all thoroughly intoxicated with victory after last year's election, but for Dale Ritch, his greatest triumph was followed by his greatest personal tragedy.

Two days after the election he, his wife Louise and close friend Richard Morningstar (a member of the North American Indian Movement) were involved in a serious traffic accident.

Ritch got off with sprains and bruises, but the others were not so lucky. His wife has continued to recover, but things have not gone quickly.

Thus, while Ritch was putting in sixty hours a week as CYSF president, he was faced with a tremendous personal strain as well.

A little while back he began to consider resigning and reached a decision a month ago. He would resign and announce it when the polls closed on election day. That way his resignation wouldn't affect the campaign. Nor could anyone say the results of the election had affected his decision.

ULC FUTURE

In light of those results what does he think of the future of the ULC?

"We don't consider it a decisive defeat," he remarked. "We recruited new members and raised our issues. We're here to stay."

He finds satisfaction in the fact that the ULC has been a force to be reckoned with at York, while there are few universities in North America, where the left is a significant influence. Ritch deserves most of the credit (or blame) for this and, thus, as a revolutionary he can consider himself successful.

His many detractors might do well to consider that the intense debate the left has initiated among York students in no way conflicts with the spirit of the university in Western society. For those involved it is definitely a learning experience.

And where is Dale Ritch going now? "Louise and I'll be going down to the east coast for a couple of months on May 24. Until then I'm just going to be doing some work around my mother's house and come up to the campus about one day a week."

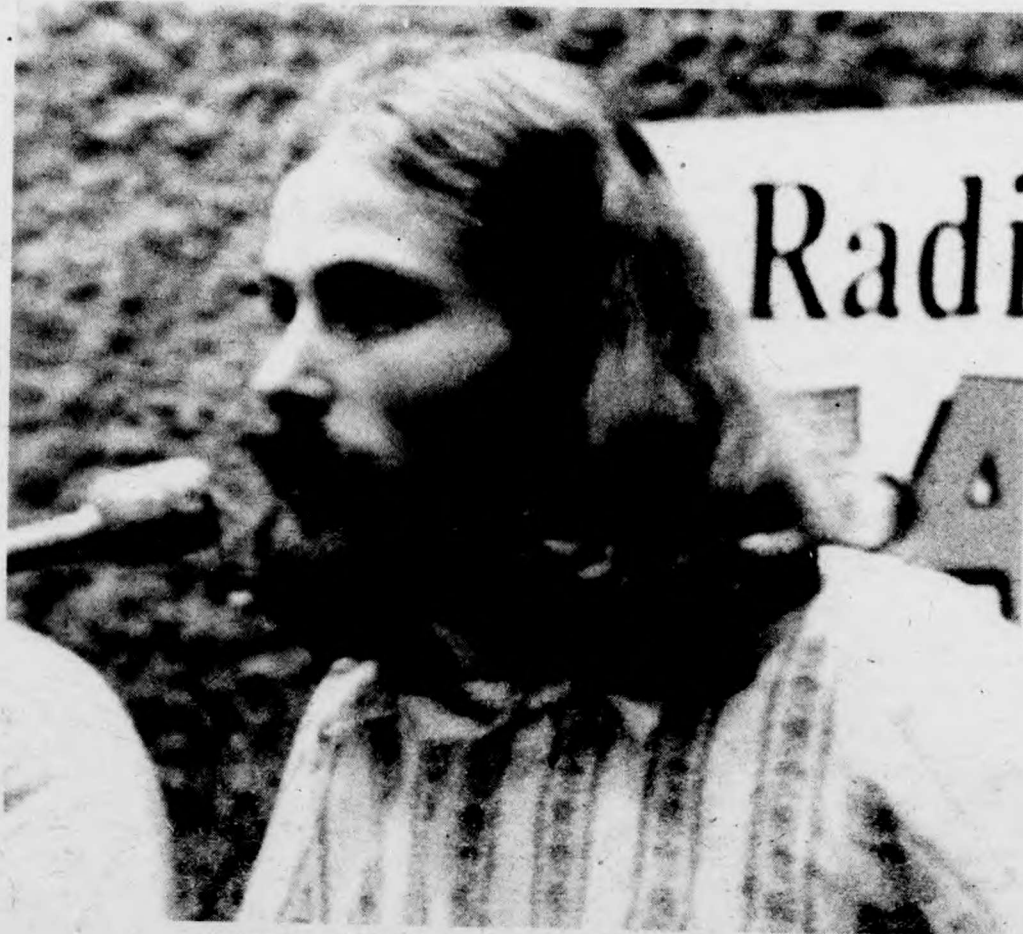
He is not sorry to be leaving York.

SOCIAL MILIEU

"I don't fit in to the social milieu anymore," he said. "At the ULC parties they put the Rolling Stones on at 10 o'clock and the dust rises off the floor. That's all right, but I like the kind of parties we have around the Socialist League, where married couples with kids get together. I like good food, good wine and I like the outdoors."

His words trailed off as he thought of the time he will be able to devote to his personal life in the months ahead. Sun-lit months which will glide by so quickly that one night next winter he will look back and wonder if they ever really existed and if those idealist philosophers were on to something, after all. Maybe working at some unfulfilling job in order to be a trade union militant and get caught up in unending struggles won't lead to anything in the end.

Highly unlikely. Dale Ritch is a Marxist for keeps; a natural political animal with instinct and judgement enough, to survive the unrelenting, ruthless grind of politics.



A pre-presidential Dale Ritch speaking in the Bearpit.