

Ombudsman: knight's armor rusting

by Robert Wilcocks

Chairman, GFC Committee to Investigate Teaching

"Students are not given to complaining about the kind of teaching they get. This is so for a number of reasons: it is better to play along with the system, you will get better marks that way; some students have a genuine concern for the well-being of the instructor involved and they do not wish to bring him harm; students have a genuine concern for their own well-being and some have a fear, whether justified or not, that reprisals are possible if they make trouble."

Dr. D.B. Scott, University Ombudsman (from *Report of the University Ombudsman for the Period Sept. 1, 1971-April 30, 1972*)

Do you agree with Dr. Scott's assessment? In one sense he's absolutely right. Students rarely complain *officially* about the kind of instruction they receive. You rarely complain about unfair or undisclosed marking schemes; you rarely complain about abuses such as: the punitive mark if you disagree with the teacher's viewpoint; or the sexual advance that is difficult to cope with; or the course load that is too heavy; or the course curriculum that is non-existent so that you learn nothing; or the teacher who won't turn up, or whose tantrums frighten the class, or whose "YES/NO" examinations are so absurdly phrased that the only intelligent response is "I don't know". You rarely complain, the abuses continue and you're grateful for those courses where integrity and scholarship are held to be, and shown to be, worthwhile.

But this description of apathetic students and rotten teachers is a rhetorical half-truth. On the one hand, many courses in this University are well-devised and competently taught. On the other hand (and this is what concerns me here) you *do* complain. The question is whether you do so in any effective way. Discussing your moans and groans over coffee-cups may make you feel better, but it won't solve the cause of your grievance.

As I usually have lunch in S.U.B. I have been able to overhear many student complaints about courses. Whilst I have not been able to discern any consistent pattern of staff misconduct, I have come to the conclusion that students often have legitimate complaints which they ruminate with varying degrees of bitterness and resignation feeling helpless to solve the problems they have encountered in classroom situations.

The nature of the abuses of which I have personal knowledge ranges from unjust and/or ill-defined grading procedures to more personal problems involving stressful encounters with instructors. In one recent example, where I introduced myself and discussed the

complaint for over an hour, I was satisfied that the students of that particular course were clearly the victims of an extremely unpleasant form of group therapy which many of them found distressing - this, it should be noted, in a credit course where, since there were neither prescribed texts nor written assignments, credit presumably depended upon willingness to participate in what can only be described as emotional orgies.

Other cases concern the use of marking procedures which leave the student at the end of the term with the impression that he/she has done well, the marks being percentages. However, when the conversion to the 9-point system is effected, there have been some unpleasant surprises (a horrifying case is discussed in Dr. Scott's Report, pp. 10-12).

Alternatively, at a late date in the year, an instructor may decide to change the weighting of the course/exam work. This latter manoeuvre is contrary to University regulations. Although it is difficult to find hard and fast rules for percentage/9-point conversion, it is mandatory upon instructors in this University to indicate clearly to their students at the beginning of the course the precise nature of the marking system which they intend to employ.

Some instructors ignore this regulation, some are ignorant of it. So are many students. In consequence, they do not realize that they have reasonable grounds for complaint.

The Committee to Investigate Teaching attempts principally by experimentation and innovation to improve the teaching environment and the quality of teaching in the University. At present, abuses of the instructor/student relationship and complaints about the academic content and demands of courses fall outside its terms of reference.

Nevertheless, at our last meeting, members expressed deep concern about instructional abuses on this campus and this article is a first small step towards helping students to solve these problems.

I know that some of you feel that the title of our committee is perhaps a misnomer and that there is, in fact, little you can do to correct a grievance or ease the tension from an unpleasant classroom atmosphere. Some of you feel - sometimes wrongly - that you cannot approach your instructor for fear of vengeance when marks are awarded; some of you are apprehensive about approaching the chairman of your department or the course co-ordinator.

In my experience, it would be quite untrue to conclude that most teachers are by nature vindictive or unfair. But it only requires one or two teachers to be so for a student to have understandable qualms about approaching his instructor.

What, then, can you do? Does nobody care whether you're the victim of circumstances which you are powerless to change? Fortunately, the University does have a highly efficient and (just as

important) highly sympathetic advisor whose job is precisely to right wrongs where he can and in complete confidence. D.B. Scott, the University Ombudsman, has already successfully dealt with many difficult cases involving staff/student confrontations in diverse areas.

Many of you are unaware of his existence. Some, who have heard of him, assume that his function is strictly limited to cases where a student has come up against the "administrative machine". Not so! He is actively engaged in sorting out the types of problems which occur in classroom/coursework situations.

Dr. Scott is one of the most approachable persons I have ever met. No student should feel pressured into passive

submission when confronted with the kind of difficulties I have outlined. See your Ombudsman. He will do his best to remedy the cause of the complaint.

By all means vent your wrath in S.U.B., but don't leave it there. See the problem through and seek the help you need. Dr. Scott's office is on the third floor of C.A.B. His phone number is 432-4725. Please help him to help you. Not only will you probably save yourself some ulcers; you will be helping to make the teaching of students on this campus better.

If we can cut out abuses in teaching, we will have made some minor but necessary progress towards the improvement of this University as a place of learning.

weekend conference

A two day Socialist Educational Conference has been set for March 10-11 in Edmonton, sponsored by the Young Socialists and the League for Socialist Action. The conference, to be held at the U of A campus, will bring together socialists from across Alberta and Saskatchewan to discuss and analyse revolutionary politics in Canada today.

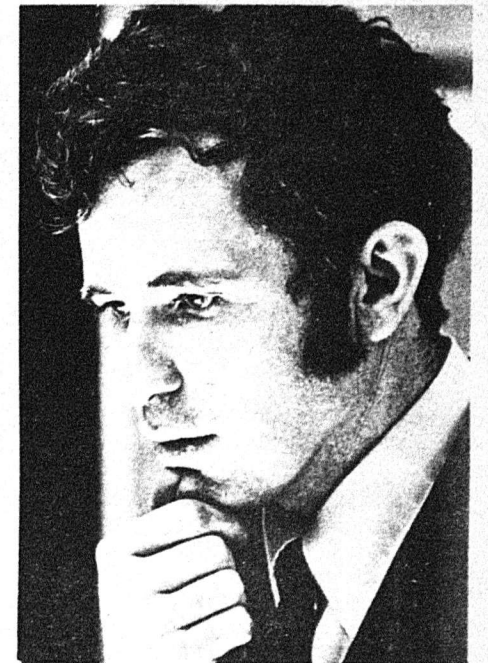
Art Young, Organizational Secretary of the League for Socialist Action/League Socialist Ouvriere will speak on "The Class Struggle and the National Struggle in Quebec." Young is former editor of the Montreal revolutionary socialist paper *Lutte Ouvriere*. In the fall of 1970, he was arrested and jailed under the War Measures Act.

A key part of the conference will be discussion and workshops on women's liberation. Joan Newbigging, Vancouver organizer of the LSA and long-time feminist activist, will speak on "Feminism and Socialism." A party on Friday night, beginning the conference, will celebrate March 8, international women's day.

Other major topics at the conference include: "The Meaning of the Vietnam 'Settlement'" by Mark Priegert, Executive Council member of the Young Socialists; "Where is the Student Revolt Headed?" by Richard Thompson, former editor of *Young Socialist*; and "The Coming Canadian Revolution" by Heidi Fischer, Edmonton organizer of the LSA.

apology

The attribution line on the article "The Sharp Blade of Progress," in the last edition of the Gateway was accidentally omitted. Our apologies and thanks to the writer, Anne Packer.tj



Vietnam prisons — Thursday

Don Luce, the man who revealed the "tiger cages" in a South Vietnam prison, a special correspondent in Vietnam for ABC and a director of the "Indochina Mobile Education Project", comes to SUB at 12:25 Thursday to talk about prisoners held in South Vietnam.

Luce's appearance is part of a cross country tour being sponsored by the Anglican and United Churches and the International Committee to Free South Vietnamese Prisoners from Detention, Torture and Death.

Vernon Wishart, minister at Garneau United who is one of the sponsors of the tour, commented in a letter mailed last week, that "While we (the Ad Hoc Committee of Concerned Citizens about Vietnam) all welcomed the signing of the Peace Treaty and the release of many prisoners of war from both sides, we are increasingly perturbed by the reports from very reliable sources of the treatment of what are called 'political' prisoners in South Vietnam."

GSA elections

The Graduate Students' Association is seeking 20 nominees to fill next year's roster of executive positions and GFC posts.

One GFC representative is required for each of the following areas: agriculture, arts, commerce, dentistry and law, education and library science, engineering, medicine and nursing, pharmacy, phys ed and science. Candidates must hand in a completed nomination form to the GSA office (room 233, Assiniboia Hall) by 4 p.m. on March 16. Forms are now available there.

The GSA council requires nominees for president, vice-president external, vice-president internal, secretary, treasurer, the council delegate to GFC, editor of the newsletter and a delegate to the Senate.

Four non-executive GSA delegates to GFC and an assistant editor for the newsletter are also being sought.

Nominations can be made by calling the office (1175) or from the floor at the meeting on March 13 at 7:30 in Tory 14-6.

spring registration in '74

Law and medical students will likely be the only beneficiaries next year of the recent GFC decision to adopt a system of pre-registration.

Assistant registrar A. L. Darling said yesterday that despite university president Max Wyman's optimism that the system would be operational next year, the problem of making class assignments would delay implementation for other faculties.

"I don't think we'll be anywhere close to solving that problem this year," he commented. Law and medicine will be first to change to the new system because students in those faculties take only courses within their own faculty.

Advance registration, eliminating the arduous fall registration period, will probably begin for all students on campus in March of 1974 for the '74-75 academic term.

Surprising support from both staff and students saw the reversal of an earlier GFC committee decision not to go ahead with the plan. The joint committee on advance registration had recommended last summer that the scheme be shelved for financial reasons, but the Council at its February 26 meeting approved the adoption of the plan despite its estimated \$70,000 implementation cost.

SU vp-academic Patrick Delaney originally moved that the present fall registration system be replaced by a mail registration in June and July. The GFC accepted an amendment by E. J. Rose, professor of English, that a March pre-registration be permitted for "senior students," those already on campus.

Explaining yesterday how the new system will work, associate registrar L. P. Morgan said that all students on campus in March of each year will

receive registration forms for the following year. New students and those who do not register during March will be allowed to register by mail during June and July. Late applicants and "left-overs" will register before classes in September.

Major change with the new system will be the elimination of the need for students to run from building to building seeking class space and faculty approvals at various points during registration.

Even had the computerized system not been approved, both registrars mentioned that plans had been made to introduce a single pre-printed form to replace cards which under the present system require that students fill in the same information a number of times. They said this form will also be used when the pre-registration system is implemented.

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