

Excalibur

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THE following is reprinted from the February 1969 Bulletin of the Canadian Association of University Teachers. Professor Macpherson, now teaching at the University of Toronto, is one of Canada's foremost historians.

University and community

BY C. B. MACPHERSON

The relation between the university and the community in Canada has been determined so far by a conjuncture of two forces: (a) the original and continuing purpose of the Canadian community in establishing universities, i.e., to avoid having to rely on importing cultural, professional and technical talents in order to maintain in Canada a level of culture and technique similar to that of older countries; and (b) the difficulty of recruiting and reproducing university teachers of the required quality unless they were allowed to see the university's prime purpose to be the advancement of learning rather than the production of trained personnel for Canadian society.

Furthermore a third force — the rise of student demands for changes in the organization or the nature of the university — is bound to alter the relation of the university to the community, and that the way in which it will alter that relation depends on the extent to which the universities and the leaders of the outside community rethink the primary purpose of the Canadian university.

The primary purpose of those who set up Canadian universities and who provide the funds for them has been and is to produce from within the Canadian community a steady supply of people with the intellectual and other skills required to provide the professional, cultural and high-level technical services which the community's leaders think necessary or desirable.

This purpose being given, rhetoric about the university being a community of scholars is only valid to the extent that the university teachers insist on being scholars. This they are in a position to do. For to perform the function expected of it the university must have teachers, and national pride will not allow their scholarly qualifications to be below a standard recognized internationally. Therefore if the university teachers, having scholarly qualifications, insist on being scholars they can go some way to requiring the outside community to accept the scholars' view of the function of the university, which is the advancement of learning in the broadest sense — the increase and dissemination of knowledge, of understanding, of critical intellectual ability. This view of the function of the university is not in principle inconsistent with the public's, and the public's leaders' view, except to the extent that the latter reject the right of the university's members to criticize, at however fundamental a level, the structure or purposes of existing society. If that right is denied, the two views of the university's purpose are indeed incompatible. If it is not, then with skill and good-will, both purposes can be served, though there can be expected to be tension between them.

If there were no further force at work, the relation between the university and the community would be manageable.

But there is another force at work, a force which manifests itself in various levels of student demands. These demands range from modest requests for some student representation on departmental, divisional and universities committees and legislative bodies, to demands that students and teachers should have equal power (and nobody else any power at all) at every level from the teaching department to the board of governors. Underlying these demands are feelings which range from a sense of lack of effective communication, i.e., lack of effective teaching and learning; through a sense of lack of voice in what is taught and what is required for a degree; to a radical rejection of the purposes, the morality and the power structure of the outside community, and of the reflection of those which students find in the university. The most radical students are those for whom the enemy is the international structure of corporate capitalism, which they see as permeating and dominating the national (and the provincial) society and all its institutions, including universities. They can make something of a case for this. Insofar as universities allow themselves, or are compelled, to subserve, and train recruits for, an

outside structure which the radical student holds to be vicious, there is little chance of accommodation between the radical students, the universities as presently constituted, and the society outside. Corporate capitalism is not likely to change its spots at the demand of radical students. But the universities are going to be caught in the squeeze unless they can prove to the radical students that the university is not, or with internal reforms would not be, a mirror of society outside, but is devoted to the advancement of learning no matter how that conflicts with the demands of the society outside.

This will not be easy. For, unfortunately for the university administrators and the faculty, we have let things go on too long in a rather authoritarian pattern. Presidents have too frequently accepted the outside view of the university as a production line (of course at the highest cultural level). Faculty have too frequently made the false inference that because, by definition, they know more than the students, the students need not be consulted seriously about what is taught and how it is taught.

The combined result has been that not just the most radical students, who want to revolutionize society, but a considerable number of students who have no revolutionary inclinations, make common cause about the reform of the university structure. If we do not change our authoritarian pattern of instruction they cannot be blamed for seeing it as reflection of a society which makes war, not love. They are in my opinion perfectly entitled to reject such a society, and to reject the university (and it is surely now evident that they can not only reject it but bring it to a halt) insofar as the university accepts, or appears to accept, unthinkingly, the values of the society outside.

I would add that student demands, both radical and reformist are a reflection of the increasingly democratic temper of the world as a whole — East, West and Third worlds — and the increasing disenchantment, across the world, with existing power structures. What has not been sufficiently recognized by the university authorities, and faculty, and the leaders of the outside community is that this disenchanted temper is a new datum, and that universities can no longer perform their proper function unless they acknowledge this and act on it. For the university cannot perform its function (the advancement of learning) unless the teachers can communicate scholarly discipline, unless they can catch the students up in a love of disciplined learning, thought, and investigation, so that the students will apply themselves to the discipline and so will gain as rapidly and as fully as may be the freedom of the city of the intellect. But a significant proportion of the students (frequently including the best students), reflecting the increasingly democratic temper of the world, cannot now be communicated with unless they have a genuine sense of participation. It follows that the students must be given the means of such participation.

The directions of the required action are obvious.

First, presidents and faculty must make it clear to themselves, to the students, and to the leaders of the community outside, that the university is not a production line in the service of existing society. The sooner provincial governments can be persuaded that the lay board of governors is an anachronism, the more readily this can be done. Secondly, presidents and faculty must recognize that students (in spite of all the obvious points about students being more transitory, less informed about the subject matter of their study, and less intellectually disciplined, than the faculty) now need a real voice in the uses to which the whole resources, intellectual and material, of the university are put: this now appears to be a prerequisite of their truly learning. Thirdly, student leaders must recognize that the people who have been trying to promote the idea of the university as a community of scholars, working for the advancement of learning, are on their side and should be allowed to get on with the job.

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