

Canadian universities lack national vision

In the first of a continuing series examining the quality of Canadian universities, *Excalibur's* Lorne Manly spoke to Isaac Bar-Lewaw, a professor of Hispanic and Latin American literature and civilization who has been at York for the last 20 years. In this interview, Bar-Lewaw, an outspoken critic of our university system, offers his views on what is preventing our schools—specifically York—from reaching their potential, and prescribes his solutions for “this sad state of affairs.”

EXCAL: You've been a very vocal critic of the Canadian university system in the past. This is the 10th anniversary of when you had articles in *Excalibur*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star* about all the problems in the universities. I'd like to know what your criticisms were then and if there has been any improvement in the last ten years?

BAR-LEWAW: To answer your question exactly, there is always improvement. Some departments got better, some departments got worse. But our education system is an ad hoc one . . . You cannot have excellence without a plan, without a vision; you must have a resolve, an ideal . . . We have here (at York) excellent chemists, physicists, biologists . . .

Some of the departments at York are really excellent—I will give you an example: the Department of Psychology, certain sections of English, not to speak of political science and history. But it's always money (keeping universities as a whole from achieving excellence). Napoleon said that in order to win a war you need three things: argent, argent argent—money, money, money. It's the same with universities, we have here excellent people but if the same day that John Polanyi won his Nobel Prize the National Research Council's budget was cut, it's ridiculous.

I consider the sad state of Canadian universities as a whole the fault of the provincial responsibility (a result of the provincial government's responsibility for education). Just a couple of weeks ago, the provincial finance minister, a Liberal—and it doesn't matter whether it's a Liberal or a Conservative, it's all the same—he suddenly found \$405 million like magic. It will go the hospitals, community colleges and universities.

Cynics says that he found the money because the Liberals are preparing for an election. Until now they have cried wolf that they had no money. This cannot be done; a university cannot run on a shoestring. This means that you cannot get a little bit of money today, tomorrow you have nothing, and after tomorrow you will worry what will be next year. This cannot be. Excellence goes through money. It's exactly like the army marches on its stomach.

EXCAL: The term 'excellence' is one that is bandied about constantly but no one ever seems to define the term clearly. What do we mean by this term and what determines excellence?

BAR-LEWAW: It is not an easy answer. Excellence means that you have students who graduate and have an impact on society; you have teachers who have something to say internationally—not the 'I praise you, you praise me, we all praise each other'—someone else has to recognize you. Excellence means that there is recognition—we are worth less or we are worth more.

For example, I have some publications, I am known in my field, I'm recognized, I'm accepted. At least I know what good is, I know what excellence means, I know what recognition means, I know what international reputation means. I know that you have to be quoted by others; this means someone takes you seriously. If I would talk myself seriously then I would be a bloody idiot . . .

Polanyi was now recognized by an international body that he is an excellent chemist. There are a lot of chemists at York who will never be recognized because they could do better but they don't have the machinery. So to answer your question directly—the best students, recognition, impact, publications, influence. Harvard has an impact in the US and the

world over. Our universities, unfortunately, do not.

There must be a special climate, a favourable one for excellence . . . Why are these universities we speak of, Harvard, Sorbonne, Oxford, etc. excellent . . . They have more money, they attract the best teachers, they also have a better selection of students. The students are the backbone of the university but it depends what kind of students you attract. If you take an average of 68—at Harvard you must have at least 85-90.

We have here some 100 universities in Canada. They are not that bad. But between 'not that bad' and good to excellent, there is a big difference. No Canadian university can compete with Harvard, Berkeley, Oxford or Sorbonne.

EXCAL: So how can we make our universities 'excellent'?

BAR-LEWAW: I would like a federal university, at least one, where a lot of us could switch. This doesn't mean that someone has to be dismissed. But a federal university would attract the best brains from any university. Money is very important. The federal government, at least, can not cry wolf—they either have it or they don't. And I repeat, if our defense is a federal responsibility, as is our post office, so education should be because without it there will be no research and development. Do you know that we are the seventh or the eighth country in the world in terms of a percentage of the Gross National Product. The US is first with 2.5 of the GNP; later comes Britain and France—even Israel devotes more for research. If you don't have money, you have no research and development, you have no good education and you will lose your independence. Because today independence is not only political, it is also economic, social, and even psychological.

EXCAL: What makes education so important that it should be a federal responsibility?

BAR-LEWAW: Look at the Japanese. They are a living example of a nation that started from scratch. They were completely destroyed, two atomic bombs (Hiroshima and Nagasaki), but thanks to their education system they are now competing with the first superpower, the United States. Their advances in the last 40 years were made mostly because their education system is so good.

Japan does not have hardly an army but they beat everyone with their excellence. Excellence comes through education, through research and development. Of course there are other factors, their discipline for example, but first of all it's education. Their universities were not taken seriously before World War II; now they are one of the best.

There has to be a commitment from the federal government. If there is no will, no vision—there must be a national purpose in this direction. We have diluted it into 10 responsibilities. A province is not a federal government. We need a national university—or two, one in French—or even three—depends on money—there can be one university with three or four campuses.

York could also be made a federal university—we would be free of the whims of the provincial financial minister.

EXCAL: But wouldn't we still be constrained by the whims of the federal government?

BAR-LEWAW: Yes, if they will treat us as the provinces treat us then there's no future—we will wallow in the same mediocrity . . . The federal system is not perfect but if it were really dedi-

cated to excellence, there is more of a chance of getting excellences on a federal level than on a provincial level.

The federal government has more power, more resources, more possibilities. Let them federalize a number of universities and free them having to worry every day where the money will come from. We won't have 10 bosses. If we had one boss with one responsibility it would be better. Imagine 10 ministers of defence . . .

The provinces have failed and we have to try out new ideas . . . I came up with the idea of a federal university because the bankruptcy of the provinces is enormous. What I said 10 years ago is as true today as it was then.

The reality of today is that in 86 years Canadians have won only four Nobel Prizes out of 534 awarded to individuals and organizations. It's sad to see that such a rich and great country as Canada has only four. Sir Frederick Banting in 1923 for insulin, Lester Pearson in 1957 for peace, Gerhard Herzberg in 1971 for chemistry and Polanyi in 1986. And look what a hoopla, what rejoicing—and so it should be—when he got a third of a prize, sharing it with two Americans. The Nobel Prizes—these are the yardsticks of excellence.

It's not a matter of Canadians being overlooked, they just don't have the international reputation because we don't have the means. Take small countries like Denmark (five million Danes), Sweden, Holland, they have more—and we can't say that we are a young country . . . This is my answer—small countries when they put their minds on it they produce better results.

EXCAL: Are you saying that the Canadian people don't realize how important education is?

BAR-LEWAW: Absolutely. The University of Copenhagen is an excellent university. It's not Harvard (in terms of endowment etc.) but look how many Nobelists they have—this gives

one of the best universities in the world, for sure the best in the United States along with Berkeley, they have a third of the student body of U of T, (48,000 at U of T, 15,000-16,000 at Harvard). The endowment at Harvard is \$3.5 billion. Their tuition is between \$15,000 to \$16,000 US a year at Harvard. Here, by the way it is \$1,200 to \$1,500 Canadian. This is the tragedy of Canada—we have no endowment, no rich alumni, we have no possibilities, we don't start the same way. So the government must open the purse.

But what you said if this is true is very sad. If Canada as a whole will not understand (the importance of education), as Japan does, then we will get (only) four Nobel Prizes in 86 years. Excellence creates excellence, mediocrity breeds mediocrity.

EXCAL: How can we convince the government to increase funding to the needed level?

BAR-LEWAW: The tragedy of academics is that we are not a political constituency; we are dispersed . . . we don't have a neighbourhood, no one talks for us. I cannot give you the cure. If I knew I wouldn't be a prof at York; I would be an advisor to the PM or a politician. Your guess is as good as mine (how to convince government).

EXCAL: Lack of money is a major factor hindering Canadian universities from achieving all they can but will on massive rejection solve all the woes of our universities or are there other barriers to your vision of excellence.

BAR-LEWAW: There is failure not only because of lack of money but also because of the administrators. They pay lip-service to excellence. They just muddle through trying to balance the budget.

They go around praising ourselves; they buy ads in the *Globe and Mail*. If they are really excellent the media would come to us. If we had which are not important for science, which are nine successes like Polanyi we would have all the attention of the press.

But we concentrate our energies on things not important for social sciences, for research. Let's take mandatory retirement. You (*Excalibur*) quoted Paula O'Reilly (the Legal and Employee Relations Officer for York) that for one full professor that retires they can take two to three younger professors. Which is not true—they do not take.

40% of our faculty is part-time. 10% of the full-time faculty is without tenure track. There are hundreds of teachers who have no future. But this is the mentality (of the administration).



YOU CANT JUDGE A MAN BY HIS BOOKSHELVES: Isaac Bar-Lewaw keeps nearly everything in his cluttered office located conveniently in Winters College. Bar-Lewaw is fluent in 12 languages and is familiar with 10 others. He's written extensively on bilingualism in Canada and elsewhere.

them prestige.

If someone had taken on my project and there would be today two federal universities, Montreal and Toronto for example, and they would have really channelled the money and attracted the best people, we would have had at least three, four or five Nobel Prizes. Or if they didn't want new universities they could have federalized two or three universities.

You asked me about universities, this is what it is—when you have money you attract the best students, you attract the best teachers. Because Canada doesn't have the same kind of tuition or the endowments universities have in the US, the government must open the purse.

The highest endowment in Canada belongs—to the University of Toronto which is more than 150 years old. The endowment of U of T in 1985 was \$135.5 million. At Harvard,

Now when the President (Harry Arthurs) goes around saying that he is dismantling mandatory retirement at York then why is he still in court? You cannot have it both ways; this is called Orwellian language. When we concentrate on things that are not essential other universities try to attract people even if they are 60 or 70 . . . The priorities have to be set by the administrators. Some of these administrators behave like Soviet 'apparatchik'; they treat the university like its their own ranch, their own hacienda.

There is no place of mind for the teachers. Education is a continuing thing. If we have to worry about what will happen next we can't really concentrate on a certain area. They (the administration) do everything to make life miserable. We can't run a university with these kinds of conditions.