

# DECLINING ENROLMENT SLOWLY STRANGLING UNIVERSITIES

By DON HUMPHRIES

In the distance a row of squat rectangular blocks rise above the unchecked thistles that battle with the once well-clipped grass for domination of the land. A pot-holed asphalt drive slowly winds around the perimeter, outlined by a rusty chain wire fence. A long row of poplar and oak trees shields the drive from the outside world.

Suddenly the trees disappear. Rising majestically above the surrounding buildings is a ten-story tower — windows boarded, empty and strangely silent. The front doors are padlocked with huge chains. Everywhere weeds reach towards the sky, where a few years before, a gardener tended professionally-laid sod.

The nearby town is also strangely silent. There are no schools because there are few children. The young people have all left for the big city.

And those squat concrete blocks? Oh, that used to be the university. It's also in the big city now.

The death threatening Canadian universities in real. A decline of enrolment is currently causing havoc in most Canadian universities. Massive layoffs of faculty and staff, justifiable or not, are occurring supposedly to correct a fiscal crisis, i.e. to balance the budget.

Unfortunately for university administrations, the enrolment decline has just started. Students are staying away because of increased costs, such as tuition fee hikes. Dim employment prospects, despite the large personal debt incurred to obtain a degree, is another contributing factor.

In Quebec, the government faces a problem similar to one which faced English Canada three years ago. Too many students are attending universities for the jobs available and many more will come unless enrolment is restricted. Accordingly the government is tightening the financial strings.

Quebecois students, unlike those in English Canada, do not have to pay their tuition fees at the start of the term. Because they can attend university for several years without paying fees, even poor people can afford the higher education there.

The government wants the financial arrangements to correspond with those in English Canada and or McGill University. Students at the Universite du Quebec a Montreal (UQAM) believe the move will eliminate 3,000 of that institution's 11,000 students. Understandably upset, the students went on strike for

five weeks beginning Jan. 26, demanding payment of fees not be mandatory until three years after graduation and then only if the students are employed in their specialized field of study. The government has pushed back implementation of its plan until September and the students returned to classes talking about striking again in September to obtain their demands.

In Ontario, the Ontario Federation of Students (OFS) fee strike flopped because student governments were afraid to back their demands for lower fees and a smaller loan portion of student aid by at least threatening to work with other dissatisfied groups to topple the government and produce one willing to meet their demands.

The government, knowing it had little to fear from OFS, ignored all protests and is talking about making students pay an even larger share of the cost of their education.

Whatever happened to equal educational opportunity for all Canadians, regardless of their financial status?

In 1966 a federal-provincial conference was convened to discuss federal government proposals for increased funding of post-secondary education. For years the National Conference of Canadian Universities (now the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada) lobbied heavily for increased federal funding and met some success. The lobbying was capped off in 1966 when former Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson presented provincial politicians with a proposal for massive transfers of federal tax revenue to the provinces to cover the expenses of increased educational opportunities.

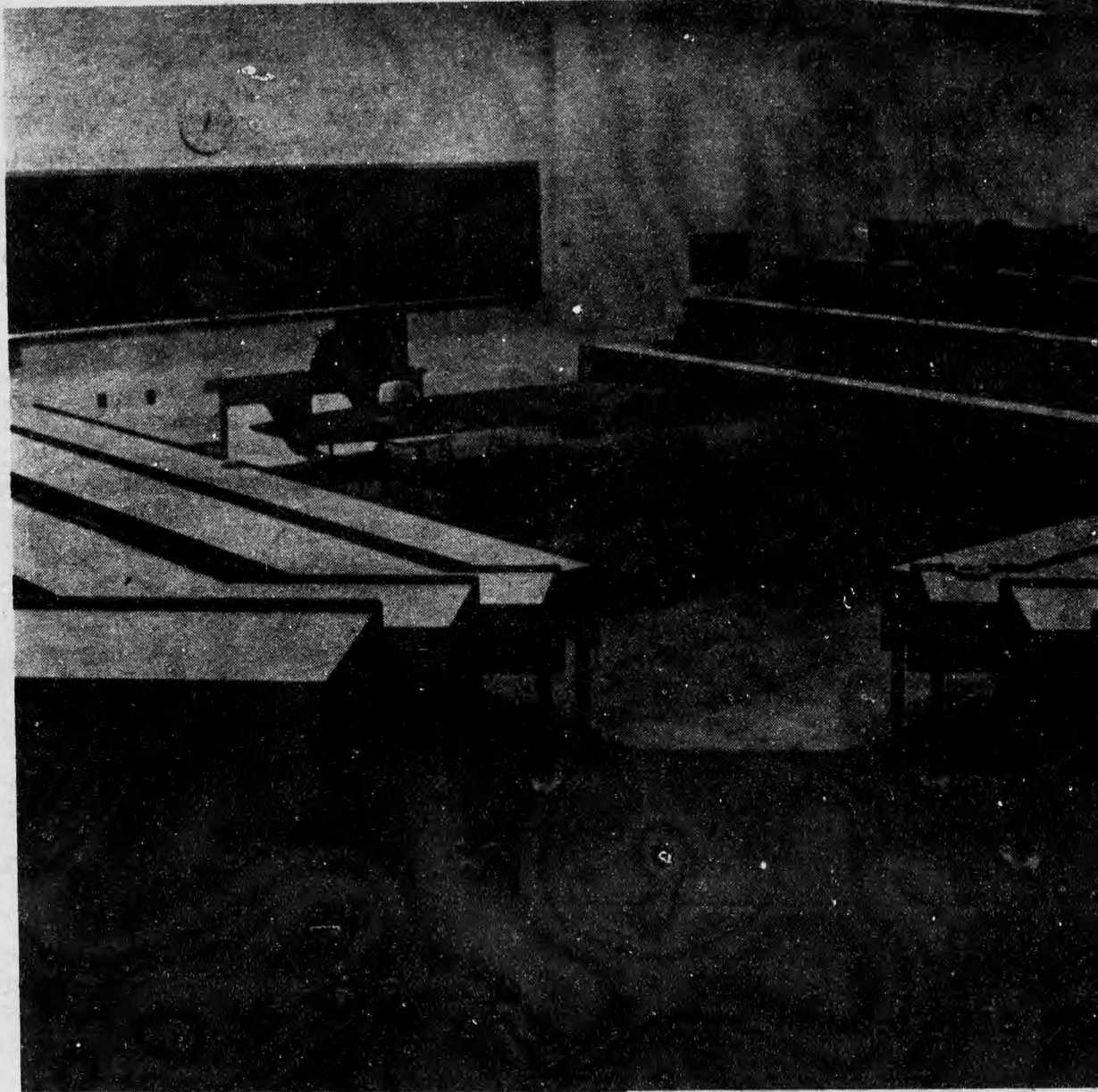
Pearson prefaced the proposals by saying, "Apart altogether from the general interest in fostering equality of opportunity for Canadians, wherever they may live or wherever they may be brought up, the federal government has specific and particular responsibilities to which higher education is relevant. While education itself is provincial, the federal government accepts primary responsibility for employment and economic activity generally in the country. We recognize that provincial governments share our concern in these matters and pursue these common aims in the conduct of their own affairs. It is, however, the responsibility of the federal government to devise and apply national policies and measures that are necessary to ensure that the economy of Canada will

continue to expand and will become increasingly productive, in order that there may be full employment and an increasing level of prosperity for all our citizens."

Many people find it difficult to understand how those words of optimism could be shattered in three short years by the reality of mass graduate unemployment. Clearly the blame for such a sudden reversal cannot be put only on the Trudeau government's now-abandoned inflation-fighting policy of created unemployment. The answer lies as much in the past as the present.

Before 1850, the Maritimes, closely tied to British trading interests, was the most economically advanced region of British North America. The earliest universities were established there.

Early in Canadian history, Montreal was an important centre of trade and McGill University soon became a leading university. By 1900, the replacement of the "wind and water" economy by a technologically sophisticated industrialized capitalism was complete, thus replacing the Maritimes with central Canada as the economic leader and Toronto



The Development of Education

Canada has historically developed because of the ability of other nations to exploit our natural resources for their own benefit. The process started with the French and British seeking furs and fish. Now the Americans seek our oil, minerals and water.

The development of education in Canada closely follows the changes in our economic system. Universities, which serve as models for the rest of the country, have always been located in the dominant economic centres. Cultural leadership accompanied the economic dominance.

rivalled Montreal as the dominant metropolitan centre. After the turn of the century, American influence in Canada was growing and the major Canadian universities looked to the United States rather than to Great Britain for models of development.

Through economic dominance of central Canada over western Canada, McGill and the University of Toronto became models for the new universities of the west. The University of British Columbia began as a college of McGill and the provincial universities of western Canada adopted the governing structure of the University of Toronto.

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