

Saywell speaks out :

York not geared for Canadian courses demand

Dean of arts John Saywell talked Tuesday to CBC radio host Peter Gzowski on radio CBL at 9 am.

Saywell: We find every year that we've not geared up adequately for the demand for Canadian courses and we sort of scour around to try to find people — artists, musicians, anthropologists and so on. And we've really not been producing. But going back to the old and golden days when I was at Toronto we had to make Canadian history compulsory to get anybody to take it.

Gzowski: Really?

Saywell: Yah.

Gzowski: ... And now it's just all turned around.

Saywell: In departmental meetings we'd say let's move to an optional system and everybody would say that nobody'd take Canadian history. Now we'd like to make other things compulsory so we wouldn't have such a demand on Canadian history!

Gzowski: It's really gone that far, eh. What are some examples of courses that are now available that wouldn't have been available?

Saywell: Well, at York at least — I can't speak for the others — what is available now that didn't use to be available are sort of interdisciplinary courses. The Canadian humanities where you've run together people in literature, philosophy, art, music, history and so on to try and take a look at Canadian culture. A course on the Canadian mosaic, which tends to take a look at it's social structure. A course that I participate in called the problem of liability — can the

country survive? In addition to the stock lit and history, economics courses.

Unidentifiable identity

Gzowski: Do the kids bring very strong attitudes about their own sense of nationalism and identity to those courses? Do they argue with you a lot?

Saywell: Yah. If you're a legitimate academic. What they bring to it is an unquestioning sense of identity which they can't identify.

Gzowski: Ha ha.

Saywell: But also a very radical, a very ravid anti-Americanism.

Gzowski: Oh, that's sorry. I'm sorry to hear that. That they have to define themselves in ... How do you handle that?

Saywell: Well, you attempt as an intellectual to say, well, why do you believe that? What's your evidence? Why? Why? And you then are accused of being anti-nationalist, because you're asking questions about the foundations of their belief.

Gzowski: So do things get pretty rough in the classroom?

Saywell: Yah. They can.

Playing loving Sir

Gzowski: Really? Have they got that way already this year have you found?

Saywell: Well, there's a game called guerrilla theatre.

Gzowski: Yah. What is that?

Saywell: Well, that's when a group of students in the class really try to shout you down — to words that we can't use this early in the morning, at least in the CBC — in response to some of the things you might say. And really, it's partly the radical ideology of disruption but it's also — if you're saying things that are unpopular — students were saying that Harry Crowe, Ramsay Cook and I had sold out to the U.S., that we were agents of American imperialism, so you start to get that fed back in you classroom. I went to Harvard. Cook visited Buffalo once, and ...

Gzowski: Haha. You can't do that! How do you cope with that in the classroom? That would shake me up if I were a distinguished academic! I'd yell obscenities back at them. Is there any temptation to do that?

Saywell: Well, you've seen To Sir With Love?

Gzowski: Yah.

Saywell: The movie?

Gzowski: Yah.

Saywell: Well, Poitier didn't shout obscenities back and he finally got the class working with him. It's by and large what you have to do.

Gzowski: Yah, but he was black, so it was all right for him.

Saywell: I'm scared, so it works.

Gzowski: What about the high schools? You say they're coming out with a great hunger for this stuff. Is that implying that the high schools are not doing the job in teaching kids their Canadian heritage?

Saywell: I don't think the high schools have sensed and responded to the demand as the universities have. And I think they know it. For example I give a course ... to senior high school history teachers in Toronto — trying to get them and show them how to develop interdisciplinary courses, new approaches. What the kids don't want is: "In 1759, General Wolfe did this and then in 1812 somebody did this, and then came Durham and then came Confederation." That's not in line with the new kind of approach to learning. ...

Gzowski: My idea of some of the hardest people in the world to change attitudes within is a high school teacher. And that may be just because most of them go from being a student to a high school teacher. But it seems to me that they're so concerned with discipline, with getting you through the course, with having a nice mark from the inspector and things, that they're not going to go up there and rap with John Saywell at York University about interdisciplinary courses.

Saywell: Well that's again less true. The school's have opened up amazingly but still the high school teacher walks in at 9 and works till he leaves. He doesn't have time to read, to think, to rap with you or me



Dean of Arts John Saywell

or anyone else about what he should be doing because he's just over-worked.

Blame the system

Gzowski: Yah. So you don't blame him, then.

Saywell: No. No I don't know him. I blame the system. The high school teacher should be treated as a professional. He needs time off, he needs free time in the day, he needs sabbatical leave. He needs to be encouraged to go to school, and they don't get that from the system.

Gzowski: Yah. We talked just very briefly about does the university respond to the student demands and that gets back to the whole participatory thing and the students working toward more control of their own university. What's happening there this year? Is it quieting down or is just that the newspapers are paying less attention to it?

Saywell: No. I think it's perhaps a little quieter than a couple of years ago in the universities, but it's not as much news as it was. But every time I say that things are quieter as soon as I get back to the office I discover 80 students sitting in it, so I have to keep my mouth shut.

Gzowski: Haha. Have you had personal confrontations with students about what they want more say in?

Saywell: Yes.

Gzowski: How much say do you think a student should have in telling you what you should be teaching him about?

Student should have say

Saywell: I think he should have a good deal of say. I think in each individual class that every — that the students collectively should be given the opportunity to define their particular interest, to suggest ways that that interest might be satisfied. Of course, on the other hand, there's the responsibility of making sure that their intellect is developed and not just their curiosity. In the university as a whole it's slightly different. I'm less concerned about student power in boards of governors. I don't think they do very much. It's really in the classroom. How it is taught. How you approach it.

Gzowski: What about who teaches it? Some students believe they should have rights of hiring and firing or some say in that.

Saywell: Yes, and at York, in most instances, they do. They're involved in selection.

Gzowski: In selection only.

Saywell: And in most departments — I shouldn't say most, certainly many — they're involved in the appointments, promotions, tenure procedures, too.

Gzowski: Then how do you as an administrator ... handle the ... danger of running a popularity contest?

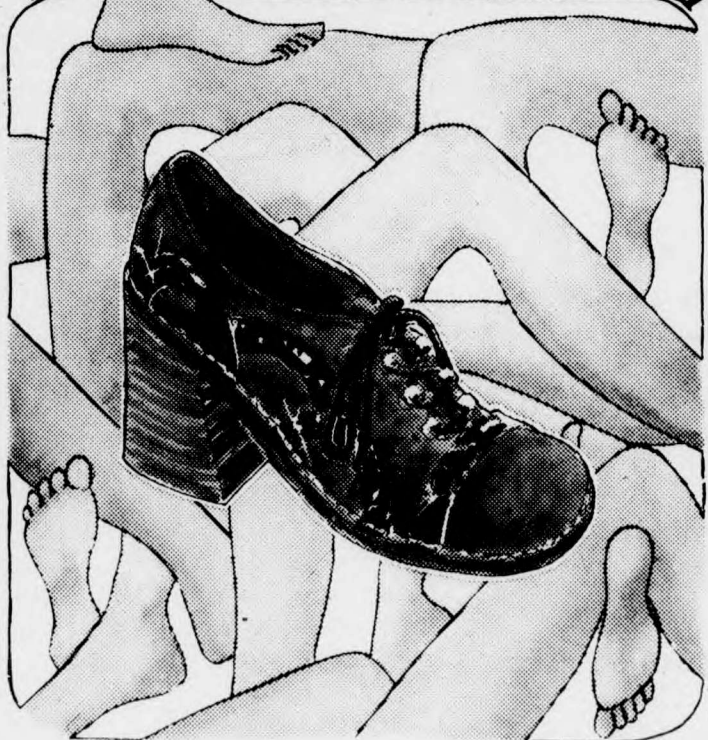
Saywell: Surprisingly enough, when the students have been given a voice, they've been as responsible as the academics.

Gzowski: Really! Just write down that little quote from the dean of arts at one major Canadian university.

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