

Macdonald on the problems confronting universities

Excalibur staff writer Lily Contento talked to York President H. Ian Macdonald last week about the recently appointed Stephenson Commission, university accessibility, tuition fees and the quality of education.

Q. Have there been any recent developments concerning the accessibility-quality of education issue?

A. I think that one of the unfortunate aspects of the discussion of accessibility is the assumption people make that if you are in favor of accessibility you are not in favor of higher standards; that, somehow, these are two competitive factors, and I think that's a



President H. Ian Macdonald

distortion of the accessibility question. I think that when we're talking about accessibility we're not saying that anyone, however ill-served, is entitled to a place in the university. We're talking about people who can meet the academic standards, but we're also saying that we know that there are a great many people who, for economic reasons, reasons of cultural background, reasons of temperament, or for reasons of changing attitudes at different points in their life may not get to university unless they have the opportunity, unless they are encouraged.

People tend to have the impression that standards in the universities are a lot lower

today and that's not true. In 1948, and to my knowledge for years before that, a 60 percent grade 13 average was the minimum entrance requirement to universities in Ontario as it has been right up until recently.

Q. Would you say that the decision to raise the average required for admission to York University from 60 percent to 70 percent was a political manoeuvre on Bette Stephenson's part to account for the \$400,000 cutback from last year's budget?

A. Not at all, because that decision was made a year ago this month in January, and it was made, not in relation to the formula funding, but literally due to the fact that this University in the last few years has grown by about 1/3 in terms of the enrolment, and we had literally reached a point where we no longer had the physical capacity to accommodate more students. We felt that in terms of size of classes, we had reached a point where we couldn't do the type of job that students here expect.

Q. What you are saying, then, is that it was basically an issue of space.

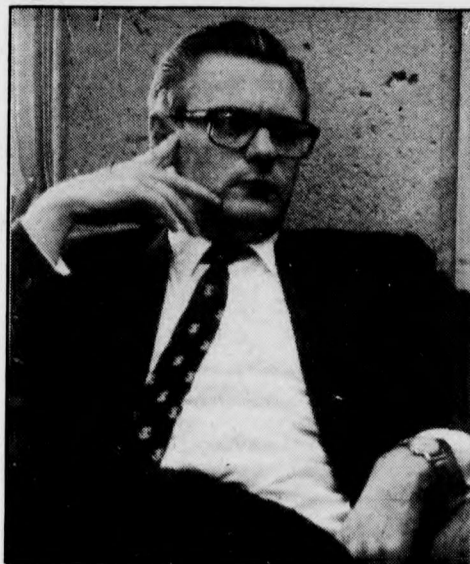
A. Space, and the ability to look after the students properly in the sense of looking after their academic needs in the classroom.

Q. Couldn't the provincial government have allocated York University more money to provide for more classrooms and more professors?

A. This takes us to the Stephenson Commission. This is what we are arguing: it is very frustrating not to have the kind of policy outline that enables the universities of the province to meet the requirements of the day. What I am hoping will come out of the Commission will be a realistic assessment of what our future needs will be. My expectation is that 48,000 students or whatever it is at the University of Toronto do not have an appetite to grow much more. So whose door are students going to knock on? We have to convince the province, I believe, and the public, that this is the place for the future.

Q. What is York going to do to present that view?

A. Well, as far as the Commission is



concerned, they have said that they will be announcing shortly how they interpret their mandate, and how they plan to work. Firstly, I'm hoping that there will be an opportunity for input from the universities, and that's the reason I've set up our own task force to prepare our case. Secondly, I hope that they will, from their early thinking, produce some kind of discussion paper, indicating the direction to which we can all act. Thirdly, in order to make that possible, I hope they will relax their timetable. I never thought from the beginning that they could do this job by this summer, unless they were going to turn around one day and say, "this is it, that's all we can do."

Q. Apparently what they are planning to do is to close some of the smallest universities. It doesn't take long to decide that.

A. Well, I don't know, though. Remember that all along, the Premier has given his commitment that no institution will be closed. That might change.

Q. How do you feel about Dr. Stephenson's proposal to have individual universities specialize in different fields?

A. We need—today and to get through the next 20 years and beyond—all kinds of technically skilled people, such as the colleges

produce. We also need all kinds of people who have a strong general education and therefore the ability to be flexible to adapt to the many changes they're going to face—that, the universities can do. And we need, above all within the university community, to offer the opportunity to do the kind of research that will result in innovations.

Q. Recently, a faculty member charged that the Commission set up by Dr. Stephenson is formed by members of an elite. A file outlining each member's background was published. It was this faculty member's opinion that this was going to affect the Commission's decisions. How do you feel about that?

A. Well, I understand the point but by the same token they're all accomplished individuals in their own fields. I hope they will be objective and fair-minded, too. But beyond that, if that were to be a problem, I think the rest of us have that greater a responsibility.

Q. What kind of participation do you expect from students in relation to the Stephenson Commission?

A. Through their constituted body, CYSF, I expect them to make as much input as they can.

Q. How do you feel about raising tuition fees?

A. I myself would not like to see fees rise. There is no magic number to what is right or wrong, but I just feel that as a proportion they shouldn't go much higher than they are.

Q. Would you like to see fees reduced?

A. In all fairness I don't think we can expect to see them reduced.

Q. Any final comments you would like to make?

A. I think that it's very important that people be very thoughtful about all these questions and after all, we have clearly reached a point where some basic decisions are likely to be made about the Ontario university system that we are all going to live with for some time thereafter. We better be sure that we do the right thing, whatever we do.



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