

EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

With H. Ian Macdonald

Excalibur editor Michael Hollett spoke with York president H. Ian Macdonald Tuesday, as he began the third year of his five year term as head of the university. Macdonald was appointed president in 1973 after years of turmoil had surrounded the presidential post. Macdonald came to York from the Ontario Ministry of Treasury where he was deputy minister.

EXCALIBUR: In an Excalibur interview last year you said you wouldn't budget a deficit for last year because you viewed 1976-77 with alarm. Well, it's here now and how do you feel?

services are cutback and so on. There is a limit to what you can do by turning down the thermostat and screwing out light bulbs. But when 80 per cent of the budget goes into salaries the big issue comes down to what use you make of your overall manpower and what arrangements you make with them. So that's the reality of the university situation and everyone faces it. For these reasons, among others we established the Commission of Goals and Objectives a year ago in order to look at where the university was going, what problems it would face, how we should get the best out of our capacity and potential.

MACDONALD: I think there are limits to the so called rationalization process. Obviously we have that to a degree now, U of T has its medical school and we have a faculty of fine arts that is really distinctive from anything else in Canada. But when you come down to what is and isn't essential at a university I think every university is always going to have a department of English and so on, so it really is not so much an either or question as it is where you put so much relative weight. There already has been considerable discussion among the universities of Ontario about this question.

potential hardship of increasing fees on the one hand and the potential decline of the quality of the university on the other. If the numbers are going up and the faculty is not getting larger, and if the number of students and faculty member on the average has to be responsible for, has some relationship to the quality of education, as is generally accepted, the option becomes one of the balance between higher fees and the lower quality of performance within the university.

EXCALIBUR: What are the indications for the financial situation next year?

MACDONALD: We have had no exact figure but the treasurer did say this summer that he intended to make his intentions with regard to spending known much earlier this year. He has initiated that because he has given the municipalities a higher priority this year the assumption is that hospitals, schools and universities might find things a little rougher this year. That is why I say the fee question will definitely come up this year.

EXCALIBUR: What is your feeling about opposition to tuition increase and to cutbacks in general? Do you think they are inevitable?

MACDONALD: It depends what people want and what they are willing to pay for. As a result of inflation principally, and the increase in expenditures, everyone in the aggregate is complaining about the burden of taxation, and at the same time is concerned about the decline in some of the basic services. Obviously it is difficult to have it both ways and the real game is each sector trying to get a larger share for itself than the others. We have been making some effort to both do some better planning for the future of the university system but also to engage the public attention and interest in the role and importance of universities.

EXCALIBUR: Some people argue that in order to stop cutbacks, corporate taxes should be increased, do you think this is counter-productive?

MACDONALD: As you know my own professional field is economics and I was involved in public administration for a long time and the one thing one has to be careful about are these easy generalizations because the fact is economic studies have shown in the past that increased corporate taxes are passed on in a large part to the public in the form of higher so that you don't necessarily penalize the corporations you may in fact have a transference to the consumer. Similarly, it depends on what it is you are trying to encourage in the economy. If you take, for the sake of argument, that in order to get out of this cycle of inflation to fulfill people's expectations you should be producing more goods and services more effectively then you don't want to build a disincentive into the sector that produces more goods and services. I think the argument about corporate taxes is too general and too simple. What I would say is the tax system should be designed and so should price control systems to encourage productivity rather than just to have a blanket attack on profits or earnings. I think therefore that solution is too general and doesn't stand up.

EXCALIBUR: How do you see the national day of protest affecting York?

MACDONALD: I haven't heard any discussion around here and I don't know what position people will take or what it will accomplish. I know that what I think is more important is discussion and debate about post-controls world and the future of the economy. It is not clear to me what such a process really proves, we know that people aren't happy with the present, arrangements, people were a lot more unhappy before there were some controls so I'm sure what we learn and what we accomplish in the protest.

EXCALIBUR: Do you think differential tuition fees for foreign students is a good thing, something that had to happen?

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MACDONALD: Well the university is in its third year of a balanced budget and I think the point I was trying to make in that conversation was that because in this current year the universities have done better financially from the province than in the previous two years and better than other sectors supported by the provincial government, there would be a temptation to say we are out of the woods. I said I thought we would continue to face restraint in the years ahead. Where as we haven't any firm indications of what will happen next year, the provincial treasurer did say the other day that as a result of increased grants to the municipalities by 10.7 per cent and in order to achieve his overall limit of expenditures which is somewhat less than that, he would have to cut other sectors supported by the province in the upcoming year. So whereas we don't know that the situation is going to be, at least there is some forwarning that next year will not be quite as good as this one.

EXCALIBUR: How do you see the university making up for the reduced funding? What will have to be cut back?

MACDONALD: There are a lot of elements that go into it and it is a combination of these things. If you look at what has happened in the last few years, our enrollment has been going up about five per cent every year, at the same time I believe there are fewer faculty members overall than there were three or four years ago. What this means is a smaller amount of faculty are teaching an increased number of students. If that were to go on, it would continue to put pressure on the ability to spend much time with individual students and possibly result in the reduction of some course options. In other areas you have constraints in the obvious basic areas of candidates for severe treatment like the library acquisition program, other basic

EXCALIBUR: When is the Commission expected to announce its conclusions?

MACDONALD: The Commission started to meet last January and throughout the spring it held a variety of open hearings with the faculties, the library, the Centre for Continuing Education, and a number of administrative units. Out of that emerged a pretty good profile of what the key concerns and issues were and we have now constituted four task forces to work on the future of the college system, one on the cultural and physical ambience of the university, the third on the future role and support for research and the fourth on the basic philosophy of undergraduate education. We have asked those task forces not to do a job of primary research on those things but rather to use the material we have and to come back to us by December 1st with some analysis of potential courses of action, pros and cons, the viability and problems of moving in one direction or another. Then we hop at some point in the new year, as soon as possible, to have concluded our report.

EXCALIBUR: I guess the main orientation of the Commission has to be in finding ways to cutback and modify the university?

MACDONALD: Not really. It has to live in a certain environment but the real questions are how do we capitalize on our strongest points, where should we put our main emphasis in the future and really on the context of what the university should be priorities should be. That must inevitably be applied within the context of available resources.

EXCALIBUR: It has been suggested that each Ontario university should specialize as a way of rationalizing the provincial university system. Do you see this happening at York?