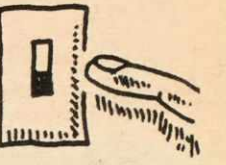


B.C. Sacred government kills art and culture university



by Arnold Hedstrom
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NELSON, B.C. (CUP)—It's down to the final week of rehearsals before Bertolt Brecht's play *The Good Person of Setzvan* opens at Studio 80 on the David Thompson University Centre campus here.

The Centre's information office expects greater interest than usual for the play produced by the theatre department and featuring an original musical score written and performed by the composition class. It's likely to be one of the last productions mounted at the Centre.

The provincial government announced Jan. 4 plans to permanently close David Thompson in May.

In a style British Columbians have become used to from their government, the decisive announcement came quickly with no advance warning or discussion. The Centre's director Richard Pearse had only an hour's notice before the announced DTUC closure became public.

Pearse says the government closed DTUC because it is not cost effective and this despite recent efforts to move toward government funding criteria.

If the Centre does close, the victim of Sacred "restraint" and horrifying new policy directions, it will be an attack on the cultural community of the Kootenay Valley and it will be the final curtain for 33 years of higher education in the region.

"The loss to the community is enormous," says Tom O'Connor, philosophy instructor at the Centre which is jointly operated by Selkirk College and the University of Victoria.

The city will lose about \$3 million annually in wages and money spent on goods and services in the community. DTUC is the area's second largest employer behind CP Rail. About 100 jobs will be cut.

DTUC's 500 full and part-time students will have to transfer to other institutes to complete their studies.

But more importantly, the social fabric of this area will be shredded. The school's library, art gallery, and theatre will all close. DTUC's faculty, active as music instructors for 92 children in the community and members of the library hospital boards, will be lost.

Gone will be the province's only program in rural education.

Students will no longer be able to take the unique interdisciplinary programs offered here instead of having to go to a "mega" school, says O'Connor.

He says the interior student is being robbed of a chance to higher education without having to go to the coast.

"What we have is a political decision to restrict access to university unless

you move to the coast. It's like it was 15 years ago in this province."

At the root of DTUC's cost effectiveness problem is an education ministry funding formula which favors large enrolments and programs with 25 to 30 students. The formula discriminates against the Centre's liberal and fine arts programs with studios and workshops, and elective courses.

Selkirk College principal Leo Perra says the cabinet's decision to close DTUC was based on comparisons with other institutes that offer similar courses.

"The Centre needs more students in the programs that are there. Stacked up against provincial norms it fares badly," Perra says. The region's small population base also detracts from enrolment, he says.

"The government was looking for dollars. They looked at DTUC with a certain set of values and with the cost situation closed the Centre.

"The training priorities of the province are geared to employment opportunities. That is the stated objective. The colleges will not offer visual or performing arts," Perra says.

Ironically, despite its inefficiency, an evaluation of the Centre's first four years by representatives of the two government ministries and the two institutes responsible for funding DTUC recommended the Centre continue based on its performance after it replaced Notre Dame University in 1977.

A letter from education minister Jack Heinrich and universities minister Pat McGeer dated Sept. 21 stated the Centre would continue.

Pearse says the Centre had just completed a market survey which outlined 31 recommendations to promote DTUC and was in the process of reorganizing courses and programs to fit the criteria.

"We feel we've been cheated in a chance to become cost effective in the view of those who fund us," says O'Connor. "We had every reason to believe we would become cost effective."

The David Thompson University Centre was a unique concept from the start, born out of a three year battle to keep a university facility in the area. In 1975, NDP education minister Eileen Dailly decided to stop public funds for Notre Dame, a private university.

The cost of educating students at NDU according to education ministry figures was reportedly double that of the University of B.C. The ministry proposed to offer courses from the three coastal universities as an alternative.

Before the NDP was defeated that year, Dailly reversed her decision and declared NDU would become the province's fourth university.

But the newly elected Social Credit government scrapped the idea and followed through on plans to open a joint facility following immense local political pressure. They passed the Notre Dame University Act in 1977 which created DTUC.

Under the Notre Dame Act, assets transferred to the government. The agreement signed by the NDU board of governors and the province stipulated the site would be used for education in the future. Today, the government hasn't revealed plans for the site according to O'Connor but rumours circulating in Nelson predict a convention centre or a minimum security prison.

Selkirk college took over the maintenance of the site and together with UVic became responsible for funding and offering programs there. This fiscal year Selkirk provided \$2.7 million and UVic \$690,000 of the Centre's budget.

"If you read the way this place is set up, it's a recipe for failure," says O'Connor. "What's needed is a recipe that allows both partners responsibilities and makes both worthy of merit. That's what's missing. We have unequal and unwilling partners."

With UVic facing six per cent budget cuts next year, administration president Howard Petch says UVic can make no effort to fund DTUC out of the operating budget. Selkirk faces similar problems and according to O'Connor, Perra is urging the Selkirk board to ask the government to transfer some of the programs offered by Selkirk in Nelson back to the Castlegar Campus.

The Nelson community, DTUC students and employees are mounting a battle to save the Centre in its present form.

Other options under study include a plan to privatize the Centre and operate with private donations, says O'Connor.

Some people hope for a miraculous shift in policy which will cause the government to realize the value of a small arts university and give the DTUC the same potential for national recognition as facilities like Alberta's Banff Centre.

But despite \$3,000 in student money and an active strategy to create public support, the Centre will likely close.

Local MLA Lorne Nicholson charged after the closure, the local Sacred riding association wants this controversy to end long before the next general election.

And as O'Connor points out, the Sacred policy on culture and education is clear.

"The trend is to use public money only for necessities. Humanities, including liberal arts and sciences and fine arts, appear to be regarded as luxury items."

