

Student antipathy to business still thrives

Ten years ago, organizations in all sectors of society were being buffeted and challenged by the ferment of North America's campuses. As a result of that experience, institutions and public values alike have changed dramatically. But what about today's campuses? What kind of changes might the current generation of university students have in store for society?

To find the answers, management consultant and award-winning public affairs analyst J. Richard Finlay organized a wide-ranging survey of student attitudes. Finlay is chairman of Unimarc International Inc., the Toronto-based firm specializing in organizational strategy, market research and international public affairs, that carried out the survey.

This article, and a concluding article next week, are based on some highlights from the survey. More than 800 students at 10 Ontario universities were interviewed for the survey.

By J. RICHARD FINLAY

University students today lack the clarity of cause and visibility of protest that marked their predecessors of 10 years ago. But the imprint of their attitudes and feelings will be no less felt by society. For while the current generation of students may be less vocal in how they manifest their concerns about society, they have deeply disillusioned and cynical views about many of its contemporary values, institutions and leaders.

Based on what is probably the most far-ranging and comprehensive study of university student attitudes conducted in recent years, a baffling, even worrisome profile emerges of today's campus mood. It is a baffling picture because it defies those instant appellations of the "left" or "right", made easier with more clear-cut issues of the 1960s. Today's students exhibit characteristics of both labels. And it is a

worrisome image because of the deep-rooted cynicism with which the vast majority of today's university students regard the principal players and symbols of our economic and democratic system.

Any attempt at profiling a particular segment of society is, at best, a risky exercise. But among the 840 students who participated in our random sampling of university opinion last March, several key patterns of thought and values reveal themselves:

• Concern about energy-related issues tops the student agenda of important national concerns - a full 95% revealing that they have become "more concerned" about the energy crisis over the past two years.

• Energy concerns translate themselves into a high degree of suspicion about the motives and methods of major oil companies - a staggering 89% believe "the energy crisis is largely the creation of the major oil

companies," and a full 87% welcome nationalization of those firms.

• Politicians, business executives, major corporations, oil companies and advertising agencies are the most wanting in terms of student confidence - no more than 10% of students having a "great deal" or "fair amount" of confidence in those professions and institutions. On the other hand, more than three out of four students claim to have confidence in medical doctors, television news, consumer activists and newspapers.

• More than three out of four students believe the free enterprise system, political parties, major corporations and oil companies are in need of major alternations.

• Business is the focus of both positive and negative attitudes on the part of today's students. Much support is seen throughout the survey for the role of small business - 69% of the students

believe small business to be "very in tune" or "somewhat in tune" with their own personal interests and concerns. In contrast, only 11% say the same thing about major corporations.

• Only 11% give a favorable rating to the general conduct and performance of the business community in Canada, while 92% believe that "on the whole, corporations put profits ahead of the health and safety of their own employees and customers." A scant 5% believe "major corporations are made up of people like you and me."

• Feelings of disaffection for big business manifest themselves in potentially powerful political terms. A full 93% say "major corporations need more government control and not less." An astounding 83% support the breakup of the major oil companies; 64% say the same thing about the major banks, and 69% believe that Bell Canada should be broken up into smaller units.

• An impressive 94% would like tougher conservation laws. More than eight students out of 10 support less foreign control of the economy, and only 6% support closer economic ties with the U.S.

• Looking toward the future, a majority of 57% say they are "generally optimistic about life and ordinary people but cynical about how society is being run and led." A full 93% believe that "society is being fundamentally altered toward slower growth and a less affluent lifestyle."

An important yardstick of the health of major institutions - and their capacity to survive - is the extent to which they command individual confidence. Here, medical doctors, television news and consumer activists lead the way, with a clear majority of students claiming to have a "great deal" of confidence in those fields.

In contrast, lawyers, economists, politicians and business executives rate low in terms of confidence; 77% of the students claim to have no confidence at all in lawyers and 78% feel the same about economists. Nine out of 10 students claim to have no confidence at all in politicians or business executives.

Again, our students reserve the lowest levels of confidence for business. A significant 93% claim to have no confidence at all in the major corporations, while 94% feel the same about the major oil companies and 96% afford that rating to advertising agencies.

Major elements of the mass media again rate high in terms of youthful confidence. At least eight out of 10 students claim to have either a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in television news, TV and radio commentators and newspapers.

In a more objective mode, our students were asked to rate major institutions on the basis of those which they thought were "working well," those which "need some change" and those which "need fundamental reform."

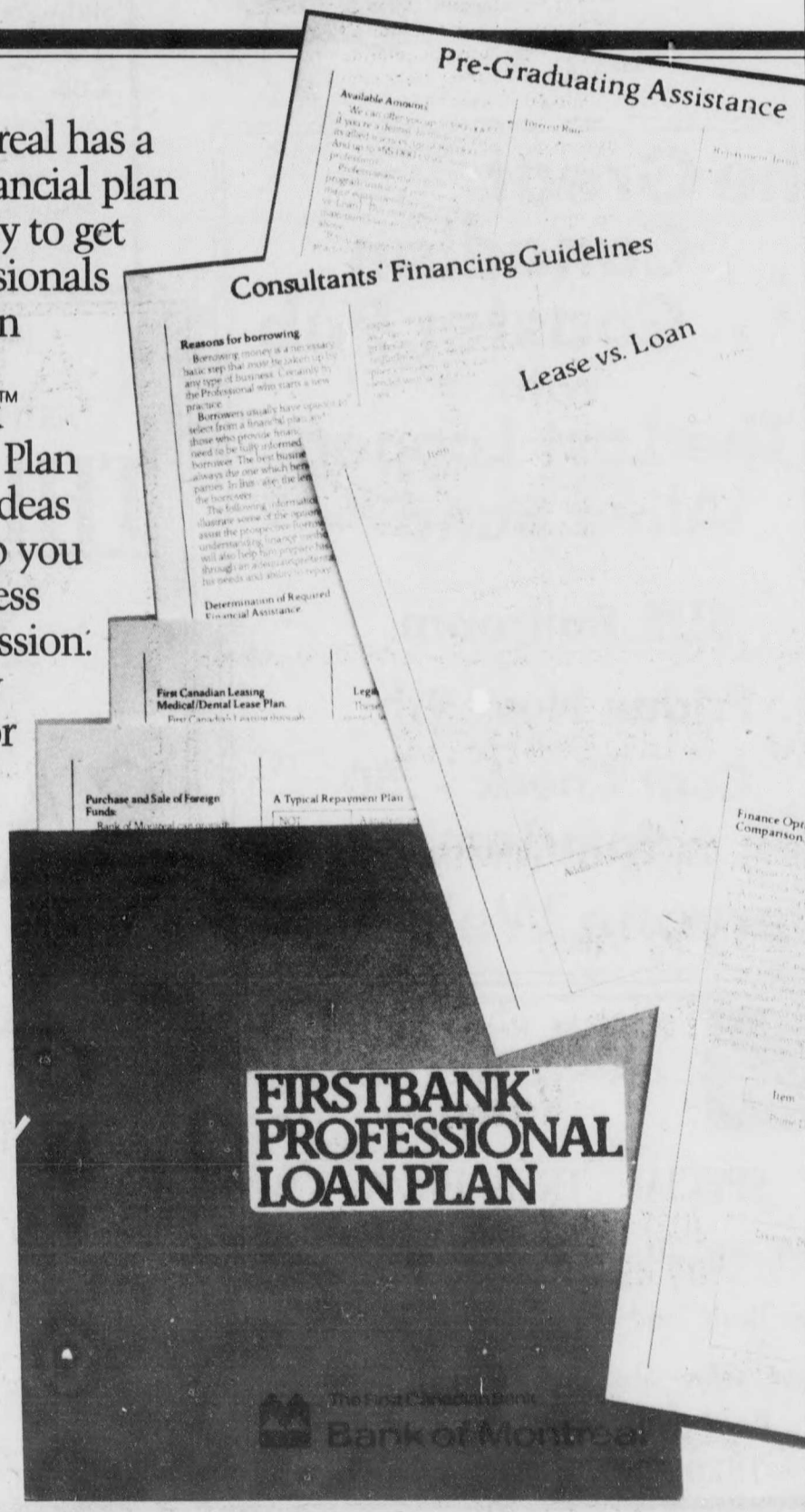
In this category, students seem to be less generous. Only three institutions are considered to be "working well" by a clear majority of students. Newspapers top the poll with 78% rating them as "working well", followed by television programming with 68% and the educational system with 57%. Note how students differentiate between their assessment of

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