

Words from the wise . . .

Mao and math don't mix

To the Editor:

I am a mathematician on a two-year contract to do research at Dalhousie. I have read Mr. Buchinski's article of January 22, and his exposé of January 29. I think that he does a meticulous job of tracking down the information which substantiates his point of view, and is very adept at ignoring information which may not support this point of view. Let me say that he certainly gave us a start, with his request for 6000 phone calls to bug the math department. We were all ready with our recorded announcement "The number of the mathematics department has been changed to 2350" — but fortunately for the Gazette, the 6000 phone calls never came.

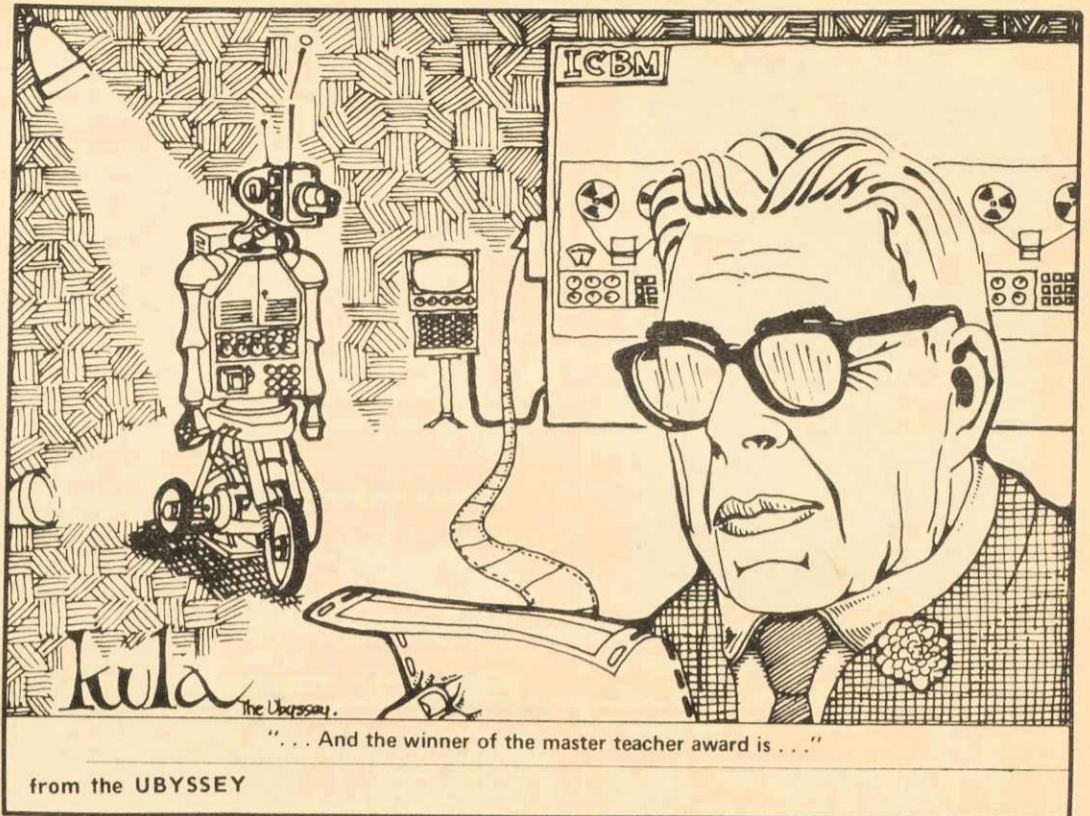
As it is clear from your articles that these bounders MacLean and Tingley are never going to tell you anything, I thought that I would take it upon myself to voice a couple of arguments against Professor Lawvere. Of course I am speaking for myself, and not for the University, or the mathematics department. One of these arguments, strangely enough, is dealt with in the November 6 issue of the Gazette. As you recall, there was space devoted to an outbreak in the law building, which took place when a group of staff and students convened to discuss an item of government policy. Most of the people there, I understand, were rather opposed to the government on that one, but Professor Lawvere and some of his group objected to there even being a discussion. Of course I am not implying that the Gazette was unfair in playing down this incident in the issues of January 22, 29. I am

only suggesting that it forgets easily.

Where your coverage may have been a little unfair was in publishing a letter to the math department from one of its thirteen members who were for Professor Lawvere, while not bothering to try to represent any of the eighteen who were against him. You also gave some space to an interview with Jean Louis Verdier from France, whose lightning quick judgement enabled him to conclude after being here for only 24 hours that the situation in the Dalhousie math department is comparable to that which existed in the universities in Germany in 1930. Those of us who have been living with the situation for over a year are very grateful to Professor Verdier for pointing this out to us, and we regret the inconvenience of his wasted trip. Of course there are some who suspect that he knew of Lawvere's nonreappointment before coming here. You see, Professor Verdier is an ardent admirer of the past president of his country, who, as some people recall, was fond of dabbling in Canadian affairs.

Mr. Buchinski's article of January 22 claimed that "Many eminent mathematicians from around the world have come to Dalhousie to study with (Lawvere), and these too may be sacrificed with his firing." I shall not have the immodesty to suppose that I am one of those eminent mathematicians, especially since I don't come from around the world. (I'm from Toronto). However, I did come here with Lawvere — in fact, we spent a year together in Zürich prior to Dalhousie. While Mr. Buchinski was delving in the minutes of the mathematics department, I wish that he had come across a statement of my own at the meeting of December 12. "If this department goes on record as supporting the reappointment of Professor Lawvere, then I shall never consider returning to the department, not even for a brief visit, nor could I in good faith ever recommend a serious student or a serious mathematician to the department."

This statement, I acknowledge, was rather harsh. However, it should be understood that it was intended more as a reproach to certain members of the mathematics department, some of whom were participating in Lawvere's undergraduate course, then to Lawvere himself, whom I consider to be a man highly devoted to his principles, and a fine mathematician. He has caused not a few of us to shake



from the UBYSSAY

the cobwebs out of our minds in order to formulate exactly what it is that we don't like about his methods. My own objections go further than the fact that I have an extreme aversion for the interruption of reasonable debate. I also (and here I differ with many mathematicians) believe that one should not incorporate political thought into mathematics courses. Professor Lawvere believes that certain teachings of Mao Tse Tung and others are compatible with the teaching of mathematics, and I am the last to question the sincerity of this belief. However, what would happen if I then decided to start teaching my political views in my mathematics courses, and then other mathematicians started to teach their political views? The result might be that everybody would end up teaching their political views and nobody would be teaching

mathematics. Mathematicians must concern themselves with the development of mathematical taste in students — the continuation, so to speak, of the species. I do not believe that mixing mathematics with politics is in the best interests of mathematics.

I shall add as a footnote that today I would not make the statement quoted above. There have been no disruptive incidents in the past two months, and I am given to understand that Lawvere's course, whose mathematical content is highly original and imaginative, has recently been relatively free of politics. Moreover, I am not convinced that the provocation which led to some of the unhappy incidents on this campus was entirely on the side of the Maoists. I believe there was some nastiness on the other side on at least one occasion last

year when the Maoists wanted to distribute their literature, and hold their meetings, free from prejudice, hostility, and the fear of brutality. Unfortunately, the decisions and policies of an institution, representing a complex of points of view, temperaments, and prerogatives, can never be as changeable as the mind of a man.

I hope that I have convinced you that this matter should not be seen in black and white. In any case, please accept the best wishes of a member of a fading generation of radicals. If any of you should ever wish to talk politics, journalism, or mathematics, my office door is open.

With kindest regards,
Barry Mitchell
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Department of Mathematics

**STUDENT
UNION
ELECTIONS**

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Note...

Basically, Barry Mitchell states that the math department has two good reasons for dismissing Dr. Lawvere — his part in the disruption of a meeting and the content of his Math 304 course.

Dr. Tingley, chairman of the math department, explicitly stated at a departmental meeting (which Barry Mitchell participated in) that neither of these questions was a reason for the action against Lawvere. The relevant quotes from the minutes are: "J. Giraud asked if the reason for the decision of the Appointments Committee was disruption of meetings. A. J. Tingley answered no." and "A. J. Tingley suggested that the discussion of Math 304 is irrelevant to the question concerned (Lawvere's case), as it had no real influence on the decision of the Appointments Committee." And later in the meeting, "A. J. Tingley reiterated that the discussion of Math 304 serves no useful purpose."

There are two good reasons why the math department would not want to use the "outbreak" as Mitchell describes it, as a reason for refusing Lawvere another contract. The first is that, according to witnesses, at least five members of Dalhousie took a more active part in

the disruption than Lawvere did. No action is being taken against them for their part in it.

The second is that at the time of the incident, there were no rules dealing with disruption of meetings, and it is as difficult to throw someone out of university when he hasn't broken a regulation as it is to throw someone in jail when he hasn't broken a law. To do so would be to declare a university equivocal of the War Measures Act.

Since neither the Appointments Committee, Tingley, or Lawvere considered the disruption important, why does Mitchell think the Gazette should have? The first article did deal with the disruption as a reason "discussed and discarded" at the departmental meeting of Dec. 14, which seems to be an accurate description.

One place where I may have gone wrong, though, was in stating in the Jan. 29 article that Dean MacLean "could not be reached for comment" about the petition circulated at the conference and implying rather strongly that it was his fault. Apparently he had tried to get in touch with us, but could not, due to a communications breakdown of our end of the line.

-Lloyd Buchinski