

# Stephen waffles on democracy

by Bruce M. Lantz

This is the first in what the GAZETTE hopes will be a continuing series of profiles of various Dalhousie professors and their opinions on matters that are relevant to students. The GAZETTE staff feels that students are not aware of what their professors think and consequently what they are doing or might do in a given situation. Hopefully this series will help people in formulating some concrete conceptions of the calibre of professors here.

The first professor to be interviewed is Dr. Bill Stephens, a transplanted American from Indiana who is in his third year as professor of Sociology and Anthropology. He has received his doctorate from Harvard University and is recently returned from a half-year leave in Spain. He teaches Introductory Anthropology, a course on North American Indians and an experimental course on the Sociology of Higher Education.

**GAZETTE:** How do you feel that a classroom should be run? How should it be structured with regard to exams, essays, etc.?

(It should be noted that here Stephens is speaking of the past two years when he taught intro soc with classes of approximately 1000; his intro anth course has only 40 this year.)

**STEPHENS:** I handled these in five sections, showed movies, used multiple choice tests. Naturally I didn't get to know many people and people didn't get to write very much; it was a sort of mass performance. This avoided some of the difficulties of large classes: that kids didn't get lost, test papers didn't get lost — some of the various snaffus which can occur.

**GAZETTE:** What about class participation in the large classes here at Dal? Is there a way to scale down the classes with the facilities available here at Dal?

**STEPHENS:** Most of us want to feel that we're doing a good job and earning our pay. Students participation makes us very happy; we try to get this in one way or another. In lower division courses at least the results are generally disappointing. I think it's mainly due to lack of skill. I suspect there's a few teachers around who relate to the students well, and generate a lot of excitement and a lot of class participation. Most of us have the desire but evidently don't have that something extra in skill and personality and results are poor. I know from talking to students I often get the complaint that there's not enough contact with the professor, they don't have enough chance to talk and so on; but if you just give them the opportunity without any particular skill involved in the way you do it you don't get a response.

**GAZETTE:** Do you think that's a lack of skill on your part?

**STEPHENS:** Yes, I do. If I'm really good I think there's a sort of invisible gulf between professor and

students with each willing to cross over but not being able to very well. The really terrific professors can bridge that gulf and extremely aggressive students can bridge the gulf. In an ordinary situation the gulf is not crossed, the kids just sit there and the professor doesn't have much of an idea what's happening. This must be correlated with the how much the kids are enthusiastic about the course too. As you move up into higher divisions and smaller classes it gets easier and easier to elicit participation.

**GAZETTE:** Do you think if we had smaller classes to begin with there would be more participation . . . less intimidation?

**STEPHENS:** Oh yeah. It's intimidating to the teacher too. There's a feeling about the class . . .

**GAZETTE:** Something like a large organism?

**STEPHENS:** Yes. When the feeling becomes more relaxed then you change. That influences the students and they influence you. But of course there's good reasons why there are these huge classes. It's dollars and cents.

**GAZETTE:** What is your feeling about professors bringing political and community issues into their classrooms?

**STEPHENS:** I would say that the professor has some obligation to stay with the subject matter and some obligation to confine what he says to things that he has some expertise in. If the instructor could make the material relevant to something that's happening in Halifax, great. But I suppose I would feel that it's not enough to just have discussions and generate effect in some of them. You have to keep within the bounds of your particular expertise.

**GAZETTE:** What is the consensus of opinion among the sociology faculty regarding the soc course union that is being proposed by various students?

**STEPHENS:** There's a wide difference of opinion. The problem with the politically interested students is that they evidently have a hard time getting a lot of other students interested. It seems that in the past a very small group of students (most of them graduates) have constituted the course union. The great masses and droves of students who go through the lower division courses don't have anything to do with it. This means, in effect, that a course union really isn't representing THE students but a little group who are interested. The faculty have been saying, 'OK, if we're going to deal with you we have to have some evidence that you're representative.'

**GAZETTE:** Do you believe that the course union, which will give students a voice in departmental decisions, is a good thing?

**STEPHENS:** It could be. The way it worked last year, it was a disaster. Meetings were harangues which went on and on with abuses thrown back and forth. Nothing very much got done. My impression is



(Keith McKay / dal)

that the students ain't really do very much on the various committees. Thank god I was able to go to Spain in the middle of December.

**GAZETTE:** I find it difficult to believe that the haranguing all came from the students side and not from the faculty as well.

**STEPHENS:** It didn't. And the department meetings, under the student participation system of last year were a disaster. Business could not get done and hours were spent which were very unpleasant.

**GAZETTE:** How do you feel about requiring professors at this university to have a Ph. D. before they are permitted to teach here?

**STEPHENS:** How does the administration find out if a professor can teach?

**GAZETTE:** I thought that was the purpose of tenure.

**STEPHENS:** The Ph. D. has different significance for different fields. If you have a certain percentage of Ph. D's. on your faculties it is a way of assuring a certain standard of scholarship.

**GAZETTE:** That still doesn't ensure that the quality of teaching here is good.

**STEPHENS:** Right.

**GAZETTE:** What about the statement made in a recent sociology department meeting that the department needs "Less democracy and more sociology"?

**STEPHENS:** As far as democracy is concerned, there is some reaction against the sort of attempts that were made last year because it was such a bad experience. However, we're still trying to work out some way to bring the students in. So far we haven't found the right way to do it.

**GAZETTE:** Do you feel that student representation in the decision-making processes of the soc department is a right or a privilege?

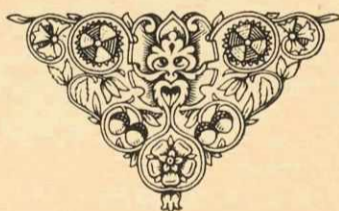
**STEPHENS:** I never thought about it.

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