

Editorial

REFLECTIONS ON OUR 1972 CONFERENCE

At our third annual conference this year, we considered what many, including myself, believe to be a serious and probably growing divergence of views between what members of the public expect of higher education in Canada and what we in the universities expect of ourselves. This theme was explored in a superb opening address by William Sibley of the University of Manitoba. He said :

Everyone looks in vain for "centres of power." ... power seems to be everywhere — and therefore effectively nowhere. The problem is not concentration of power but its dispersion. Inertia, incapacity to respond, is the inevitable result.

... Given this inertia we should not be surprised ... (that) Universities are largely unable to delineate their goals and objectives in such a way as to make them operationally significant. Normative platitudes exist aplenty; statements which have operational bite ... do not.

... But do not boards of governors still have power? I consider that this assumption is also becoming an illusion.

What is the upshot of all this? Simply, I think, that multiversities cannot continue to be what they are and survive.

In response to external criticisms, which ... are going to be pressed very hard, we adopt unduly defensive postures which give excellent promise of being suicidal ... the reality of our crisis is still appallingly remote from the consciousness of many academics.

Otto Thür, of the Economic Council of Canada, in the second theme address delivered in French, stated that unintentionally the university community — especially the economists — had allowed the public in the 1960 ties to develop excessive expectations of higher education. Said he :

Education was ... presented to the public as the key to providing access to common well-being.

I do not think I am wrong when I say that in the opinion of the public, we have laid too much emphasis on publicizing the economic benefits of education ...

... Canadian society mainly recalls what was loudly proclaimed. Must it be blamed for not remembering what we thought but failed to express?

The proceedings of the conference, edited with unsurpassed speed by Jeffrey Holmes, are now available from our secretary, Grant Clark, at a pre-inflationary price of \$5.

Let me add four personal observations.

Most academic conferences I have attended have failed to make a striking impact on a majority of those who attended, partly because the diversity of themes dissipated interest and attention. This conference was organized around one theme. All the papers presented related to that theme. Thus, even though it was not fully planned for, there was a cumulative impact which, in my view, was desirable.

There was a fairly widespread feeling that universities, at least those in predominantly English speaking parts of Canada, had failed to define clearly their own goals — even for themselves. Consequently they have been less than effective in defending themselves against mounting public criticisms.

With few notable exceptions, such as those brought about under the influence of the Council of Ontario Universities and the Association of Atlantic Universities, the universities have been slow to learn to co-operate with each other in matters of the public interest. Such co-operation as universities have achieved is often induced not so much by a lofty sense of the public interest, but rather by a dread that governments increasingly will intervene in academic matters which they still do not understand.

I believe that we in the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education may contribute to public understanding and to our own understanding of basic issues in higher education. We can do this more effectively in that we are a society of concerned individuals, not representative guardians of our respective institutions. Our future as a Society depends in large measure on the extent of our concern for those whose needs will be served by higher education. This concern should lead us, for example, to contend for a reduction in the amount of unnecessary duplication of courses and research facilities within and between universities. The same concern should motivate us to press for the elimination of courses that have largely outlived their usefulness. As a final example, our concern will lead us to urge university faculties and Senates to take more care in approving new courses and programs. Too often approval is readily given largely because Senates have not established a clear set of academic priorities. Thus responsibility for making difficult decisions is passed on by default rather than by conscious choice to senior university administrators and Board of Governors.

We, the members of this Society, have a continuing contribution to make to academic statesmanship !

Robert M. Clark.