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**“Confessions of a University President: Reshaping Learning in an Anti-Education Age”**

**Lorna R. Marsden, PhD**  
**President & Vice-Chancellor**  
**York University**  
*where innovation is a tradition*

**The Canadian Club**  
**Monday, 6 October, 1997**  
**Royal York Hotel, Toronto**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

## **Confessions of a University President: Reshaping Learning in an Anti-Education Age**

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Thank you for the invitation to speak today. This Club has a long and distinguished history and I am very honoured to be here.

Twice in the recent past you have heard about education and universities from the chairs of two of Canada's leading banks. Therefore, today I'm going to talk with you about ....banking.

Banking, that is, on your desire to know about a sector of our society that is undergoing profound change; that is responding to the underlying demographic and economic changes not only in our country or continent but throughout the globe; and - at the same time - is trying to preserve and protect the most crucial elements of those time-honoured institutions we call universities.

What is more, universities are doing this in a cultural climate with the most instrumental attitude toward university education in 200 years - - a cultural climate that exhorts universities to focus on providing to their students those prizes of jobs and wealth over focus on an educated mind. Of course jobs are very important -- they always have been for Ontario citizens. And of course an

expanding economy helps everyone -- it always has in Ontario. But throughout the history of universities in Ontario, there has always been a greater imperative to universities to put highest priority on developing knowledge and strong values, a critical mind and a sense of social responsibility in students. By historical standards, our is an "anti-education age".

The historians of Ontario universities, such as McKillop, Alexrod and Cameron<sup>1</sup> for example, have recorded the priorities of universities in relation to the priorities of public policy, a continually changing balance, but when the citizens of Ontario today express their strong concern for education - as they do in every public poll - it is interpreted as a link to the labour market more than a preparation for life including the labour market.

But not all feel this way. John Cleghorn, Chair of the Royal Bank, has often said that it is a tremendous asset to have a good liberal arts or humanities background which provides a rich preparation for other professional degrees or high skill diplomas. And he, fortunately, is not alone. (And Minister Snobelen says that when he returns to university, it will be to study philosophy).

One of the defining moments of my life came at a dinner party in Ottawa some years ago given by the Swedish Ambassador in honour of a most distinguished member of the Swedish Royal Academy. The academic stopped the conversation cold by stating that Canada is the most socially inventive country in the world: you are the country, he said, that has created peace and economic stability over a huge and diverse land mass, with the greatest possible diversity of

religion, languages and cultural origins, and have led the world in many areas of science, language learning, community development....Well, the Canadians at the party were having none of that. No we aren't, they declared, thus demonstrating one of the chief characteristics of the Canadian character - a strong desire to deny our achievements, successes and downright genius as a country!

**We are socially inventive. We have invented a type of university that combines both the ancient and honoured traditions of learning, the creation and exploration of knowledge, with the preparation of young Canadians, and more recently older Canadians, for the community and the labour market. We do both, and we do them both well.**

But in this period of transition from industrial to information-based economies, with all the complexities that David Crane documents in The Star week after week, can our institutions adjust quickly enough?...But more on this later.

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I turn now to confessions: while our central purpose in universities is the pursuit of knowledge and the profession of our knowledge with students, the university president is a split personality. On one hand, all presidents and rectors are professors and deeply committed to the values of our universities. On the other, we are CEO's of very large corporations required to think like auditors and marketing experts. How much do you know about our "industry"?

All universities engage in mid-term tests, and here's yours!

Of the 88 members of the AUCC -- our national association of accredited institutions -- 60 count as independent, publicly assisted degree-granting institutions. So there are 60 CEO's, and among them how many are women? (9)

How many degree-granting institutions are in Ontario? (18)

In the Atlantic provinces? (20)

How many universities are there in Quebec (and I don't count all the campuses but just the degree-granting institutions)? (9)

And in British Columbia (4)?

But all systems differ by province and each university develops its specializations in different ways. Some universities are based on institutions founded in the 17th and 18th century in what is now Canada, and some are newly minted. For example, which are the universities created in Ontario in 1992 and 1993? (Nipissing and Ryerson).

Altogether, Canadian universities provide an education for how many students each year?

(850,000 full and part-time students per year)

How many are at the graduate level ? (74,997 full time and 42,297 part-time).

Now here's the skill-testing question, leaving how many undergrads? (733,000) .

Some of these credit programmes are for continuing professional development, such as the 400 students Osgoode Hall Law School enrolls in its part-time Master of Laws Programme. And there are many not-for-credit courses offered by universities.

In order to provide this education, many jobs are created. How many full-time faculty members do you think there are in Canada? (36,000 - of which just 8,000 are women). Many more contractually limited and part-time faculty are added to that number as demand rises and falls for certain subjects.

Universities are creating more than 150,000 other jobs in non-faculty positions - glass blowers, plumbers, computer programmers, human resource and fundraising specialists - accountants, lawyers, planners, finance experts and secretarial, security and cleaner jobs.

Altogether, Canadian universities are a \$9-billion-a-year industry, with \$2 billion going into direct research costs. In this city alone, the three universities spend more than \$1 billion on operations which goes directly into this economy. In addition, our more than 100,000 students spend considerable sums on housing, transportation, food, books, clothes and entertainment. Our capital and endowment budgets provide construction and maintenance expenditures.

So there is a local and immediate need for people like yourselves to be interested in universities

in this country and this province. We are an important part of your local economy and your tax base. It is important for our economy now as well as in the future for our graduates.

You should know that Ontario funds its universities less well than any other province in our Confederation. Ontario is 10 out of 10 in operating grants per capita (1996-97 figure). And less of your tax dollar goes into universities than ever before. As the Smith Report documents, commissioned for the Government of Ontario and reporting last December, indexed to 1977-78 as 100, expenditures on universities and colleges has dropped dramatically to 61 while the share to hospitals and elementary and secondary schools has risen to 183 and 135 respectively. In short, your tax dollar contribution to post-secondary education has shrunk, and your tax contribution to hospitals and Kindergarten-to-grade-13 education has risen a very great deal.

In universities, we don't argue with the needs of the health sector nor K-13 education. What we do want you to know, however, is that all estimates show that if Canada is to remain competitive, highly educated people are required. Human Resources and Development Canada tells us that in the year 2,000 - - just 26 months from now -- nearly half of the new jobs will require more than 16 years of education. And that trend continues. It is mostly the positions calling for highly educated workers that are going unfilled; employers want more university educated graduates and our graduates have a much higher employment rate than others. Graduate from university and have a better life! That is why places are filled rapidly.

In order for universities to respond to this demand, lead time is required: a student takes three or four years to earn a degree; a computing department takes a year to readjust courses and recruit new leading faculty to teach those courses. Investment now will not catch up with the need by the year 2,000, but it will provide fast adjustment.

The investment is not just in faculty and laboratories or computers. It is also directly into students. Student debt loads -- an average debt load based on a modest standard of living and some other support from jobs or family -- has risen rapidly to about \$24,000 after an undergraduate degree. Why? First, costs of tuition and the cost of living have risen; second, universities are attracting a much wider range of students from families less able to support their adult children; and, third, the well-paying summer jobs have been replaced by year-round low-paying jobs. Debt, bankruptcies, and the need to hold down several jobs while studying is mortgaging their future and our countries future. This problem requires immediate solution.

Which is why we were most grateful to the Government of Ontario and you, the donors and taxpayers, for the matching-contributions program that allowed universities last year to raise millions for investment in bursaries. York University alone raised nearly \$34 million in cash and pledges to be matched by the Government. And it is why we rejoice in the Prime Minister's announcement of the Millennium Fund that, starting in the year 2000, will create direct financial support to between 20,000 and 30,000 students across Canada that will lower the financial burden on them and their families. All this is funding opportunity and a future for young people in our country.

To meet the needs of those students, we need to have the most competitive faculty and programs available and, I fear, Ontario is falling behind. Poaching by richer universities in the USA and even elsewhere in Canada goes on at a more rapid rate than the poaching of our medical doctors. In business schools, keeping a person who leads in the finance area has become almost impossible for most of our universities. In many areas of science, education and the humanities it is the same picture.

Universities are highly competitive although you may not perceive this. Behind the ivy and tweed runs competition that rivals that of Nike and Pepsi. On one hand we share knowledge freely and debate ideas in reasoned discourse, while on the other, each professor watches the competition at other universities with the eyes of a hawk to ensure that students win scholarships, get into graduate schools and that publishers aren't favouring one institution over another. Scientists race their findings through the night to register patents and get their findings first into the leading journals. We compete vigorously for the best students to fit our program mix and we are rivals for partnerships, generous benefactors and friends in the community. Service to our students is improving greatly, and no one can deny that we take on the debates of our community with a critical edge not found elsewhere - particularly at York!

Education is no longer the elite club of the upper-middle class. In a generation, universities have responded to the new society of Ontario. As an undergraduate at the University of Toronto in the late 1960's, I was not allowed into Hart House on grounds of my sex, and professors advised women not to go into science. This discrimination was widespread. In my graduating class

most faces were white, able-bodied and male. Today we know that three years from now, 85% of all new entrants into Ontario's labour market will be women, visible minorities, aboriginal peoples and people with disabilities. And Ontario's universities are preparing students in all those categories with education and skills, with a shared understanding of our history, our values and the leading scientific knowledge. We are doing this in a highly competitive global marketplace for education, with an average revenue of less than our competitors - about \$5,385 dollars less per head than comparable universities in the USA neighbouring states. We want to do more. We will do more - do it efficiently, accountably and with a passionate desire to be the best.

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The people who founded this country saw immeasurable importance in universities. In 1665, the Jesuits founded a seminary in Quebec for the education of young men. By 1789, Dr Charles Inglis, the Founder of King's College in Windsor, Nova Scotia argued that universities were essential otherwise: "the youth of Nova Scotia will be sent for their education to the Revolted Colonies - the inevitable consequence would be a corruption of their religious and political principles". By 1867, Quebec and New Brunswick each had three universities, while Nova Scotia had five and Ontario seven.

After the Second World War, the Massey Commission reported:

*All civilized societies strive for a common good, including not only material but intellectual and moral elements. If the Federal Government is to renounce its right to associate itself with other social groups, public and private, in the general education of Canadian citizens, it denies its intellectual and moral purpose, the complete conception of the common good is lost and Canada, as such, becomes a materialistic society.*

Soon after, the Federal Government began to fund universities and, later, granting councils for research. And from those investments we have learned much. We know a very great deal more about science, industry and the environment. We know vastly more about how people learn, how our brains develop and how to ameliorate the suffering - - physical, social and psychological -- in human lives. Our provincial governments have responded to the demand by our citizens for access to universities, especially in geographically dispersed areas and for disadvantaged groups. A greater and greater proportion of our people work globally and understand what it is to be in a transnational company based in a trading nation. We understand, although we have not yet solved, the basic elements and challenges of the information age.

We have transformed universities: visit our campuses where people are gaining degrees in digital technology, atmospheric chemistry, and cultural studies using self-directed learning, video-classrooms and Internet. Go to the library and find rows of computers. Try to figure out who is

the professor, who the student and who the entrepreneur operating from an on-campus incubator. See classes start at 7 a.m. and finish at 10:30 p.m. Come anytime Monday to Saturday. Year round.

And still see the time-honoured oral tradition in lectures and tutorials, room mates learning to survive together, field trips with wet feet and smoky camp fires, football, soccer and hockey games (played by both sexes), and arguments, debates, and discussions. Visit our research centres and see the work underway to solve problems that face science, the arts and business, so that new jobs will be created out of new ideas and innovations of old ideas.

Let me conclude as Brian McKillop does in his history of Ontario universities:

*The modern university has inescapably become the social, intellectual and moral site on which the competing imperatives of past and future, of tradition and innovation, are played out, whether in the arts, the sciences or the professions....It encompasses all of this and yet it remains linked also to a more ancient lineage, to conversations that took place before the nation-state was conceived, to a time centuries earlier and under distant skies, when teachers with something to profess and students eager to learn began to gather together to examine human affairs and to seek to turn darkness and shadow into light" (McKillop, 568).*

All McKillop says is true - and we need your understanding and support to turn our shadows into light.

1.

Axelrod, Paul, *Scholars and Dollars: Politics, Economics and the Universities of Ontario, 1945-1980*, University of Toronto Press, 1982

Cameron, David M., *More Than An Academic Question: Universities, Government and Public Policy in Canada*, The Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1991.

McKillop, A. B., *Matters of Mind: The University in Ontario, 1791-1951*, University of Toronto Press, 1994.