SPEECH TO THE CANADIAN CLUB OF TORONTO

"THE WAR AGAINST THE UNIVERSITIES"
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Mr. Chairman, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to have been invited to speak to the Canadian Club of Toronto today, and I want to thank you all for your kind invitation. The Canadian Club of Toronto must be one of the most important in the country, if not the most important, in a city that so in many ways is our flagship city. Indeed, Toronto has anticipated this status for many years, by naming a number of its institutions with the name "Canadian" or "National" instead of with the name of your city. Thus we have, not the Royal Toronto Yacht Club, but the Royal Canadian Yacht Club; not a Toronto magazine but Canada's National Magazine; not the Toronto Exhibition or even the Canadian Exhibition or the National Exhibition, but the Canadian National Exhibition. I hope then I may be forgiven for imagining that I am addressing the National Canadian Canadian Club, or perhaps the Canadian National Canadian Club. Joking aside, I consider it a real privilege to be with you.

A number of people might have expected me to speak today either about the Quebec situation in Canada, or about the situation of McGill University in Quebec. I am not going to talk about the first because it has been talked about so exhaustively and exhaustingly over the past two

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years. About the second, I have chosen to talk about universities somewhat more in general so as not to be parochial. If any of you are interested, I can tell you where to find comments and opinions about McGill to suit your own taste. If you are interested in reading about McGill as an incredibly rich and privileged university in the midst of a group of deserving but handicapped Quebec universities, then you should read the French-language press of Quebec. If you are interested in reading about McGill as a university in the last stages of oppression, and about to go down the drain, then you should read the English-language press of Toronto and points west. The truth as I perceive it lies just about squarely between those two extremes, in a position that is substantially the same as that perceived for themselves by most Canadian universities. That's how I came to choose my topic, "The War Against the Universities".

Residents and interns; happy ending

Many of you will be familiar with the marvellous comic monologues recorded some years ago by Bob Newhart. In one of them, President Abraham Lincoln's press agent is talking to the President by telephone on the eve of the occasion of the Gettysburg address. We hear the press agent's end of the conversation.

"Abe, baby," he says, "Don't keep changing the speech." (I am reconstructing this from memory.) "I put a lot of thought into

I know you don't believe that the world will little note nor long remember what you say, but can't you see that's the old humble bit?"

"And listen, Abe, don't read the speech from the typed draft. The last time you did that it almost ruined your image. Copy the speech onto the back of an old envelope; if you're short of old envelopes, I can

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send you down a fresh batch from Washington."

"And Abe, sweetheart, don't change four score and seven years to 87 years. Can't you see that's meant to be a grabber?"

My title, The War Against the Universities is of course meant to be a grabber. I am not going to claim that any substantial group is waging a conscious war against the universities of Canada,or for that matter that the defenders of universities are conscious of defending them against a concerted attack. Nevertheless it is true that many actions today originating from many different sources constitute in effect attacks upon the universities, and their total impact is not greatly different from what it would have been if these actions had arisen from a single enemy (which I do not suggest). Not all the attacks are wrong, and very often what is needed is not a strong defence, but rather a reasoned discussion or explanation.

From whom do the attacks come? Strangely enough, I do not think that the public in general is very much inclined to attack the universities. A few months ago, I was invited to be the visiting panelist on the CBC Radio program "Cross Country Check-up". This is a two hour Canada-wide phone-in program with a different assigned topic each week. It is said to be Canada's second most popular program. Our topic was, "Is a university education worth it?" I never did get the CBC to answer the question, "worth what?"

I tried to prepare myself to field highly critical comments both from the telephone callers and from a group of university students who were in the room with us.

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With one exception, the critical comments never came. The answer to the question, "Is a university education worth it?" was almost invariably yes. Sometimes there were qualifications, but the overall impression was overwhelmingly positive. I was astounded and pleased, because normally one assumes that people will be quicker to come forward with complaints than with compliments. When our politicians tell university people that the public is fed up with supporting universities, to whom then are they referring?

Oh yes, what about the one exception? That was a man who came on the line and forthrightly announced that you could learn more in an insane asylum (his words) than in a university. He then proceeded to establish his credentials as an expert by citing all the insane asylums with which he had had experience. He did not cite any comparable experience that he had had in universities, or whether indeed it is easy to tell the difference, but his intervention was a very refreshing one.

As I see it, the attacks tend to come from graduates or their parents who are frustrated by the job market, from the media and their commentators and experts, from politicians who have to worry about public expenditures, and by social critics who worry about accessibility to universities, the effect of universities on society, and so on. Let me try to choose a typical attack in each of these categories, and try to offer some defence or discussion. I'll start in reverse order, and talk about the social critics.

Ten years or so ago, universities were being hailed in some quarters as universal social agencies. So far as I know, only a few members of the university community itself ever made any such claim, but nevertheless this

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kind of talk was very much in the air. It was assumed and stated that the universities should be able to set in motion the changes that would cure our social ills. Usually the remedy was held to be the destruction of our present form of government and economic system, and the substitution for it of some idealized new system. Though we have apparently passed for the moment through the stage of violent campus demonstrations on this score, some of the atmosphere still lingers round the universities, and within reason it is a healthy attitude. It generates attacks from self-styled liberals that the universities are not doing enough as agents of change, and from conservatives that nothing is admired within the universities except a kind of fuzzy radicalism. The two attacks come from opposite directions, but they really do not cancel each other out. Rather the situation resembles that of being attacked from the left and the right at the same time.

The only defence I have against these attacks is that the university is not, and cannot be, some kind of universal social or political agency. We hope, on the other hand, that the people produced by the universities will be the agents of change with a wisdom that comes in some part from their university experience; I do not believe it is realistic to ask for more. Similarly, the universities are often criticized for not taking strong stands on controversial questions, but if the university is to tolerate a wide variety of views within its own walls, then it is difficult for it to adopt some of these views as its chosen gospel. The effect of doing so is to disfranchise those whose views are different.

As I have suggested, the intensity of the battle on this kind of question seems to have waned a good deal, although I do not know how much

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credit the universities can claim.

Let me turn to a different kind of attack, that of the politicians and public servants who are quite correctly trying to ensure that the universities deliver some kind of value for the money spent on them. The great difficulty here is that although one can evaluate the cost of universities in money and effort, it is extraordinarily difficult to measure the output of the same institutions. Simply counting the number of diplomas awarded will hardly do; after all, in that competition the schools advertised in the back pages of Popular Mechanics magazine could win hands down. In the revolting expression "More scholar per dollar" (a slogan that has been heard in Ontario as well as in many other jurisdictions), it is relatively easy to count the dollars but very difficult to evaluate the worth of the scholars.

Slogans like the one I have just mentioned can only reflect a kind of factory view of the universities, a view that is cordially disliked by most university people. On this view, there is a market for a product that the universities can produce, and the universities should plan their output to suit the supposed market. The factory should run efficiently, and the cost per unit of product should be as low as possible. For reasons of equity, the various universities should be as much alike as possible, but for reasons of efficiency they should not duplicate each other.

These remarks are not wholly without merit, but they tend to be made in such extreme form that they often appear as attacks. In the first place, manpower planning to determine the "market" is a notoriously shaky undertaking. Even if it were an accurate exercise, to implement this kind of manpower planning would mean not only keeping students out of programs

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that they wished to enter, but forcing other students to enter programs for which they had no ambition. It denies to students the right to compete at the end of their studies in their chosen field, even if they are willing to take their chances from the outset. What typical universities do about this question, perhaps not well enough, is to try to see that the university contains some reasonable balance of fields of study, to try to see that there is a certain amount of competent guidance counselling in the schools and universities, and to try to give some concrete advice on employment prospects. Finally, the student is given the maximum freedom of choice that the facilities will allow. I find it hard to see any alternative way of acting.

So far as maximizing the efficiency of production is concerned, we all agree that the universities should make the best possible use of their resources. What university people dislike, though, is being evaluated in terms of crude indices like number of diplomas per dollar, or number of net square feet per student graduated, or whatever. It is as if one were to evaluate the worth of a legislative assembly in terms of the number of bills passed per b.t.u. of heat supplied to the building, or were forced to justify that a symphony orchestra has three flutists, rather than two or four, on economic grounds. For me and for most university people, a university is a cultural institution as well as a practical one, and should be so evaluated. This does not mean that costs will inevitably run out of control; after all, the first rule of social science is that human wants are insatiable, but our social system does stagger along somehow.

Let me now try to give an example of an attack from commentators

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in the media, the government, and elsewhere. Perhaps one of the most popular is the accusation that university studies are too vague and theoretical, and that university research is airy, theoretical, and of no economic benefit. The Canadian effort to formulate science policy (so-called) over the past fifteen years is a part of this view. The opening gun in the great science policy debate, at least in the modern era, was fired by that very academic body, the Royal Society of Canada, in 1964. It has been taken up by almost everyone under the sun since then, but I have recently looked again at the Royal Society's 1964 report, and I have to say that we have not made very much progress over the past fifteen years.

Somehow our commentators have become sold on the idea that the secret of economic progress is education and research, provided the commentator in each case specifies what the research is to consist of. This was taken up very strongly in an early report of the Economic Council of Canada around 1966. In nearly all such comments, the usual style of university research is denounced in the terms I have already mentioned, and a plea is made for more mission-oriented or directed or applied research. Again within reason, there is merit in these arguments in moderation.

The trouble is that most such arguments depend on the assumption that you can specify in advance what it is that the proposed research is going to reveal. If this were known, of course, the activity in which you are engaging might be a worthwhile one, but it would not be research. There is a marvellous piece by Alec Douglas of the National Research Council appearing in the excellent Canadian science magazine, Science Forum, in 1969. Douglas calls his piece "The Soothsayers". In it, there is a

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succession of fictional science policy reports from the Federal government at intervals of twenty years or so. The 1902 report stated as usual that we need comprehensive mission-oriented programs aimed at solving nationally important problems, and cites the need to develop breeds of horses suited to Canadian needs, that communications should be assisted by doing development on/producing telegraph wires, and because of our extensive waterways, the design of river boats should receive urgent attention. He recommends that the professors at McGill and Toronto who are developing work on x-rays and various other peculiar radiations should not be supported because they had no practical application. The second science policy report, in 1924, recommends that radio communication and air transportation be supported but warned against becoming involved in the actual manufacture of electronic components and aircraft. The report cites the importance of radioactive materials and x-rays in medicine and industry, and suggests that the universities should be made to work on these aspects. It notes that Canada's need is for inorganic and analytical chemists, and that the university chemists who wish to dabble in physical and organic chemistry should not be supported.

The third fictional science report, dated 1946, points out that electronics and aircraft manufacturing are some of our largest industries, and that advanced techniques in physical and organic chemistry are basic to Canada's most essential industries. It proposes that Canadian science must now be used to advance Canada's industrial development.

Rail passenger travel has reached new heights, and it will be vitally necessary to work on ways further to increase this capacity. In a highly technical portion of the report, it

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is stated that the newly developed computers might play a large part if more reliable vacuum tubes can be developed, and it is suggested that research in this area would yield large dividends.

Meanwhile, the tendency of Canadian universities to concentrate on purely academic problems like
the mathematical treatment of the properties of solid state substances, and the properties of biological materials at the single cell level should not receive support as being too theoretical.

The final science policy report is dated 1968 and is not fictional but real, or rather it is Douglas's paraphrase of a real report. I assure you that it is good fun to read it after the preceding fictional reports, but also a little chilling.

Obviously, we need practical-minded and mission-oriented research in the universities. Obviously we have it in large measure, in faculties of engineering, agriculture and forestry, medicine and the other health sciences, and a number of others. We even have it in the much maligned faculties of arts and science, but we must not fall into the trap of thinking that university research of any kind, however pure or however applied, will guarantee economic happiness for Canada. What we do know is that economic happiness will be very limited if we don't have these university efforts.

My last example of an attack is the most widespread one of all these days. It is of course the attack where the bullets that are fired are labelled "unemployment of graduates". I am afraid that to some extent the universities themselves have invited this attack, because in the past some university people allowed the assumption to grow that

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university graduation was practically a guarantee of a superior job right after graduation. Many university people, of course, reacted strongly against this view from the start, but it is a seductive view and the idea is widespread that whether it is true or not, it ought to be true.

In a society with widespread unemployment, especially among young people, no program of education can possibly guarantee an immediate superior job to every graduate. It remains true that the unemployment rate is the lowest among university graduates, and is the highest among those whose education terminated the farthest from university. In my opinion, however, this kind of discussion focuses too much on the first few months after graduation. During this period, the advantages of the professional or vocational university degrees are at their maximum, and the students of arts and science are at a disadvantage. It is strange to focus on this relatively short period out of a lifetime, when in fact we ought to be speculating on the value of a university education over the forty-odd years of working life and the years of retirement that follow graduation from university. Over this span of years, the advantages of a university education are absolutely manifest, and are much less tied to the exact nature of the university degree than is usually assumed. The world is full of people who are doing jobs far removed from their subject of graduation, but who somehow retain the advantages of university education. No one in his right mind expects that the stock of specific knowledge held by a new engineering graduate, for example, will last him throughout an engineering career. After a few years, what count most are good habits of thought, an acquaintance with the sources of basic knowledge, and the love of continued

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learning. What I am saying is that it is the cultural content of the university education that counts in the long run. It also follows that some people who have not attended university at all in fact achieve similar advantages on their own. Some people have said that a general B.A. degree is useless; perhaps in the first six months it is, almost. On the other hand it is hard to picture our complex society without a generous leavening of those same B.A.'s.

My "War Against the Universities" thus turns out to be a rather peculiar contest in which the attackers are often not malicious, and indeed in many cases do not know that they are attacking. Equally, the defenders are not always very effective, to the point where sometimes they almost seem to invite the attacks. My message, if I have one, is to urge people who care about our society to be defenders rather than attackers, to be constructive rather than destructive, and to give some thought to deciding which is which.

I am going to close with a story that illustrates the difficulty of deciding who is the attacker and who is the defender; the story has nothing whatever to do with universities.

A young sport driving a powerful sports car is speeding along a country road. He comes over a rise, and to his horror there is a horse-drawn hay wagon just emerging from a gate to a field, and now squarely crossways in the road. He slams on the brakes, skids wildly, barely misses the rear of the wagon, and finds himself going down the ramp towards the open gate into the field. In order not to get stuck in the field, he accelerates again, swings parallel with the road inside the field, and continues at high speed to the other end of the field where there is a second

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gate. He shoots up the ramp through this gate and down the road, still at high speed, with no damage to anyone.

Meanwhile, back on the load of hay, the old farmer has watched this performance with awe. He turns to his helper and says, "My God, we just got out of that field in time".

Telling who is the attacker and who the defender in that story is as hard as it often is in the case of the universities. Whatever the difficulties, I think we all ought to try.