SURVIVING THE WIND SHIFTS:
CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES IN AN ERA OF CHANGE

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Gloom is very much the fashion these days within our society. Ecologists, economists, the Club of Rome, climatologists and even philosophising Prime Ministers are all warning us that in one way or another we are on the course to disaster. This mood has even come to permeate the academic world. For instance, a recent article in the Canadian Journal of Higher Education was titled: "Surviving the Crash: Canadian Universities in the Era of Disillusionment." That this gloom is not restricted to Canada is illustrated by the title which the Times Higher Education Supplement chose for its report on an international meeting of heads of universities: "Vice-chancellors take fright." As a relatively new vice-chancellor I found that an encouraging headline indeed!

The title which I have chosen for my remarks to-day is intended to suggest the applicability to our current university situation of what I have learned as a sailor: that when adverse wind shifts or daunting squalls and storms prevent us from sailing direct to our destination, we must adjust our course and trim our sails accordingly, but always anticipating future wind shifts and with the ultimate objective one is trying to reach in mind. Laurence Peters of Peter Principle fame put the importance of the ultimate objective this way: "If you don't know where you're going you'll end up somewhere else."

The current mood in our universities arises from the contrast in the circumstances of the 1960's and the 1970's. During the 1960's Canadian universities could be confident about their role, performance and future. It is true that in 1956 the National Conference of Canadian Universities, concerned at the impending flood of students, had in fact chosen as the title for its proceedings: "Canada's Crisis in Higher Education." Nevertheless in the sixties the federal and provincial governments and the universities jointly entered an expansionary partnership which brought about rapid growth accompanied by general public approval. The achievement in that decade was a significant one: the universities managed to deal effectively with an unprecedented four-fold increase in enrolment, they improved existing and developed new undergraduate and graduate programmes, they expanded and enriched the range of opportunities for the young people of Canada, they developed an internationally recognized capacity for research, and they introduced greater openness into the conduct of their affairs. The citizens of Canada, therefore, have a right to be proud of what was accomplished with the help of the generous contribution of public funds, federal and provincial.

In spite of these achievements universities to-day feel themselves on the defensive. The public in general, the students, the parents, the legislators and the major public bodies are questioning and critical. In large measure universities are, in fact, paradoxical as it may seem, suffering from their own success.

Before the sixties universities with the majority of their funding from private sources could grow and develop in accordance with their own internal objectives. Now universities have become absolutely essential to the economy and to national development. Not surprisingly therefore, they are coming under much closer scrutiny from the public and the governments which provide by far the largest portion of their resources and expect in return a high yield from this investment. As a result universities find themselves faced with perplexing and apparently contradictory public expectations: the public seems to be asking for greater access to universities and particularly some professional programmes, while at the same time reducing the real financial resources available to provide these; to be asking for new and wider-ranging courses and for more student welfare and accommodation but with no increase in the fees for students; to be asking for a larger proportion of Canadian professors and Canadian content in course work while freezing or reducing support for the graduate programmes which would improve the supply of Canadians equipped to teach in universities; to demand and reward handsomely the services of professors who act as consultants and researchers and yet be critical of the time they spend away from the classroom; to advocate the need for research to be more relevant to the immediate needs of society while reducing the real resources available in support of research; to espouse the need for the free quest for truth in the universities and yet to be voicing suspicions about how universities manage their affairs and about practices relating to tenure, sabbatical leave, teaching loads, and the quality of research and its motivation.

By contrast with the public approval and expansion of the 1960's, the 1970's have been marked by public questioning and shrinking financial resources. Clearly, the increases in student numbers and in public funds could not be maintained at the rate of the 1960's. Nevertheless, in the period since 1972 the revenue available to Ontario universities for teaching, calculated on a per student basis, has in each year fallen substantially below the rate of inflation until this year their real revenue stands at 83 per cent of its value in 1971/72.

Furthermore, the present stringency is compounded by the current absolute freeze on any increase in research funding established by Ottawa. If this freeze is continued in its present form it will mean that the appointments of at least one-tenth of some 4,000 technicians and research assistants in Canadian universities who are paid from these funds will have to be terminated if the minimum salary increases allowable under the anti-inflation guidelines are to be available to their colleagues. By this action the federal government has singled out university research for a degree of compression which exceeds by far that imposed on its own operating departments.

Much has been written and said in recent months about sacrificing immediate aspirations within our society in order to bring inflation under control. But, as Ian Macdonald has pointed out, in this regard one sector of our public economy, the universities, has been setting an example for the past four years. During that period they have been asked to serve increasing numbers of students while receiving government grants which failed to match inflation. Furthermore, this has been the one sector in

our economy which throughout the period had price controls on its services because student fees were not allowed to increase. Much maligned as they have been, the achievement of the universities during this recent period of stringency in maintaining a high quality of operation is an achievement of which I believe the Ontario universities can be justifiably proud.

The announcement last month of a 14.4 per cent increase in total grants to Ontario universities for 1976/77 signals a welcome recognition by the Ontario Government of this situation and of the fact that the constraints of the past four years had brought the universities to the point where the Government's advisory Ontario Council on University Affairs opened its report this past autumn with the statement: "The Ontario university system is is trouble." Despite this relief, the cumulative effect of the financial decisions of the last four years has brought universities to the point where they must re-examine their priorities and consider whether they can afford to continue all their existing activities.

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If the wind shifts and squalls of the first half of the decade have been severe, looking ahead to the balance of the 1970's and 1980's adds little cheer. The latest demographic studies, the general economic trends and the increasing bureaucratisation of society indicate that the leaning ivory tower may lean more dangerously still. Indeed, the supreme challenge for higher education may be, quite simply, survival. If universities do not respond realistically and effectively they may suffer the fate experienced

by the monasteries which in the medieval period played such a dominant role in society but declined rapidly in influence and importance when they failed to adapt to a changing society.

Three sets of issues are likely to be our major concerns. First, how large should university systems be? Second, what should universities be doing? Third, by whom and how should decisions about universities be made?

The latest demographic studies indicate that the size of the university student age group will continue to rise quite rapidly in Canada until it hits a peak in 1982, then will suffer a dramatic ten year drop until it bottoms out in 1992 (more than 15 per cent below the current 1976 level), and finally will return to the present level about 1998. With this roller coaster pattern of enrolment in prospect universities are faced with the dilemma of choosing between building to handle the 1982 peak and then having more staff and facilities then they need during the following decade, or restricting the addition of staff and facilities and hence enrolment of qualified students for the next seven years. In any case, either in 1982, or by conscious choice earlier, universities will at the very least have to adapt to an end in the pattern of enrolment growth which has characterised the last fifteen years. This has its beneficial aspects of course. As one writer has pointed out, if the number of scientists were to continue to double at the present rate with only a few more doublings there would not be enough room on earth for all the papers they would write. Be that as it may, the need to adapt to the violent enrolment fluctuations which have been forecast will be a source of considerable

stress and turmoil because of their implications for staffing in our universities.

The second question, "what should the universities be doing?" is likely to become even more critical under the continued pressure of tightening purse strings. Indications, such as those in the Henderson Report, of the increasing difficulty governments are having in sustaining even the present level of social services generally, and the basic and fundamental stresses our western economic system appears to be undergoing suggest that universities cannot realistically look to an early end to austerity. Faced with limited resources the public is already raising questions about the relative priorities of universities between widening accessibility for students and maintaining quality (as illustrated by discussions about admissions standards and about the level of fees), between teaching and research, and between courses oriented to job training or salable skills and those aiming at a general education. With limited resources universities will be unable to avoid hard decisions on these questions.

The third set of issues relates to who should make decisions about universities. Where until two decades ago many universities could still rely largely on financial support from private resources, not only the techniques and equipment required for modern knowledge, particularly in the natural, applied, health and social sciences, but also the rate of growth in staff and facilities during the last decade and a half, have required financial support at a level which only governments could afford. The observation is commonplace but is

vividly illustrated by the fact that at Queen's, for instance, over the last twenty years the proportion of the Queen's budget which has come from government sources has increased from 40% to over 80%, and by the fact that during the same period the total annual provincial contribution to the provincially assisted universities in Ontario has grown from $16 million to over $650 million. Now that universities have been transformed from private ivory towers to public utilities , and when such vast sums of public money are involved, competing with other insistent demands for public funds, issues such as public accountability versus the autonomy of universities, centralized co-ordination and even control as against diverse and distinctive institutions, provincial as opposed to federal priorities, and nationalistic as against international orientations are increasingly coming to the fore. Contributing further to the potential turmoil is the prospect of unionization of faculty. A thought unthinkable only a few years ago, possible dismissals of tenured professors and already apparent reductions in their standard of living have made province-wide unionization appear increasingly attractive to some academic staff as a route to direct bargaining with the ultimate paymaster, the government, and as a means of joining the enlarging sector of those so generously nourished directly by public funds.

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If we are to resolve these issues in the difficult circumstances ahead we must be clear about the fundamental objectives of our universities. Unfortunately, during the last decade

we have too readily left these unexamined because of our preoccupation with the logistics of higher education. Faced in the 1960's with an enrolment which grew more than fourfold within ten years, our attention was taken up quite naturally with "coping with numbers." More recently, widening "accessibility" to universities and the problems of tightening financial constraints have dominated our concerns. Thus like the fanatic who having lost sight of his goal redoubles his efforts our watchwords have been "accessibility", flexibility", "viability", "accountability" and "co-ordination" with insufficient conscious thought to what it is that these are means to.

The current debate about increasing the "productivity of universities" and obtaining "more scholar for the dollar" illustrates this. Discussions about productivity can hardly be meaningful unless there is a full understanding of what the products are and of what process is needed to create these products. One writer has given an illustration of this from the arts which is equally applicable to higher education: despite all our advances in technology it still and always will take three manhours to play a forty-five minute quartet. Arguments based on simplistic variables such as "class-size", "contact-hours" or "student/faculty ratios" not only make quantity , rather than quality, which is much more difficult to measure and much more important, the primary criterion for evaluation, but they narrow the focus so that only a part of the whole is seen.

The fundamental goal of the university as an institution

and of all its individual members is learning and discovery. Learning and discovery are the joint products of the various activities of teaching scholarship, research and service performed by the members of a university, and it is this which distinguishes higher education from mere further education. Teaching at the university level is not merely a process of transmitting acquired knowledge and skills but a joint pursuit of knowledge in which the teacher and student are equally engaged and in which the goal is not to shuttle masses of students through rigid curricula but to inspire imagination and stimulate the critical and creative intelligence. To do this, as we have always emphasized at Queen's, higher education must be highly personal. Scholarship and research are an essential activity within universities because they shape and transform university teaching into a critical process. Similarly, the service which is provided to governments at all levels, to business and industry and to the arts not only makes available to society the product of learning and discovery but in turn orients that learning in directions related to the needs of society. But in all these aspects one thing is critical: learning and discovery require an institution which supports and encourages free individual enquiry rather than limits it.

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What I have said about the purposes and function of universities carries with it implications for the resolution of the three sets of issues which I have identified as facing us in the years ahead.

On the size of the university system, particularly in relation to fluctuating enrolments, I would emphasize two points. First, as we at Queen's have already recognized in consciously limiting our enrolments, the general levelling off in growth will make it essential to ensure that structures and inducements are created within universities which will maintain the spirit of innovation and discovery. Otherwise, the steady state may become the disaster of the solid state. Second, we must recognize that the outlook of universities is a long-term one and that they require stability to perform their function. Is is natural that legislatures and governments should tend to select and respond largely to short-term issues, for it is on these issues that votes are won at the next election and there is nothing worse for the politician than to lose the next election. But the activities of the universities have a longer purview. No one can predict what the world will be like at the dawn of the twenty-first century; but we do know one thing: that the men and women who will have posts of responsibility then are already university students now. Furthermore, the technological and social solutions required in the twenty-first century will grow out of the apparently obscure research of scientists and scholars currently working on the frontiers of the unknown. Thus, only in the twenty-first century will we be able to evaluate fully the contribution to society of the work that is going on in our universities right now.

When we return to the second group of issues I identified - the relative priorities for the application of our limited resources of accessibility or quality, teaching or research, and career

training or general education - the key point I would emphasize is the distinction which I have already made between further education and higher education. Clearly, broadened access, effective teaching, and provision of employable skills are all important, but they could be and are provided just as well by community colleges. What distinguishes the higher education which the universities are uniquely equipped to provide is the emphasis upon learning as discovery. Since the process of instilling a spirit of intellectual adventure must be, as I have suggested, ultimately a personal one, a broader accessibility which entails the sacrifice of this and of the objective of excellence becomes simply self-defeating. In a time of limited resources, if universities are to be true to their essential function and to the real contribution they can make to society, the maintenance and improvement of quality is an overriding first priority.

Similarly, both because of the way in which research and scholarship transforms the sort of teaching which should occur within a university and because there is virtually no aspect of a complex modern society that has not depended heavily on the research done in universities or by university-trained people, research cannot be regarded as something that the professor does in his own time or as a frill that can be dispensed with when funds are limited. It is an essential aspect of the central function of a university. For those who suspect that most university research is irrelevant to the concerns of the real world I would simply point to a selection of some of the research that is currently going on at Queen's which relates very much to the concerns of our society. Research is being carried out in such diverse fields as resources policy, communications systems, transportation, magnetic levitation systems, urban planning, legal systems and justice, health care, biomedical engineering, the

impact of cultural pluralism in Canada, the interpretation of the history and cultural development of Canada, elections, intergovernmental relations, and the interface between our schools and universities.

As to the orientation of their programmes, while universities from their beginning in medieval times have always been vocational, they have also always been more than that. At its best higher education inspires the sort of intellectual curiosity in which deep probing of a particular subject or study for a particular profession is illuminated by an understanding of its place in the larger scheme of things. The function of a university is not to prepare men and women to fit ready-made into job-slots on graduation but to educate to-day minds which will shape the society of tomorrow and to liberalize, civilize and humanize people for the future. In this respect the real measure of what a university is doing for society is in the quality of its graduates and the contribution they make to society decades after they have graduated.

When we come to the third set of issues which are facing us, those connected with the relationship between universities and governments, the character of universities as centres of learning and discovery indicates why the public and governments must have an interest in their support and operation and yet why at the same time universities must remain places of liberty free from stultifying bureaucratic controls. Because the advance and spread of knowledge is central to society, both in a material and cultural sense, governments, as agents of society, have a vital and legitimate interest in the support and development of those institutions whose primary function

is the generation and transmission of knowledge. But the need for public support and for accountability for that support creates a genuine dilemma, for the most precious gifts which the universities can bestow on society - the fruits of learning and discovery - can only be made by free minds with wide freedom to range. Learning and research, science and philosophy, literature and arts are free or they are nothing. Universities must, therefore, be kept free for their essential contribution to society which can only be made in the flexible conditions which freedom provides. That does not mean a licence for universities to be inefficient, to change policies capriciously or to disregard the needs of society. Universities must, of course, account responsibly for their use of public resources. But at the same time they must be protected from the deadening impact of the tendency for governments to translate accountability into ever-increasing bureaucratic control and regulation over the details of university operations.

From this conclusion emerge a number of implications for the future. First, we need strong buffer organizations, such as the Ontario Council on University Affairs at the provincial level and the various granting councils at the federal level, to make it possible to reduce the need for direct government intervention in the details of university operation while at the same time serving effectively as guardians of the public interest. Otherwise, we shall become part of the bureaucracy entangled in the same detailed regulations and red tape. Second, while we must continue our efforts as universities

to co-operate with each other to achieve greater efficiency and co-ordination, we must resist the pressures to impose a centralized pattern of uniformity upon universities which would deprive society of the benefits of diverse and distinctive approaches to higher education in individual institutions. Third, we need to revise the current federal-provincial fiscal arrangement devised in 1967, under which the federal contribution of fifty per cent of the costs of higher education has tended to lose its visibility, resulting in an increasingly provincial focus to higher education in Canada and a relative neglect of the wider Canadian and even international concerns. In the forthcoming review of federal-provincial fiscal arrangements relating to universities which will begin during 1976 we must make sure that, in addition to provincial objectives, national objectives for universities will receive attention commensurate with their importance for balanced university development.

Fourth, the present de facto restraints limiting the legal responsibility of the universities to set their own fees should be removed. No one wants to raise fees, and were they to be raised it would be incumbent not just on governments but on the universities themselves to ensure the establishment of adequate bursary programmes in order to eliminate financial barriers to students from low income families. Nevertheless, in the face of a continued gap between funding levels and the costs of maintaining quality the universities have only two choices: to raise fees or reduce quality.

Fifth, our universities must, as Douglas Gibson put it in a recent convocation at Queen's, retain the capacity and accept the opprobrium of bothering graduates, parents, other individuals and corporations

for private support. If we do not have the courage and energy to raise money for ourselves, we do not deserve any significant degree of independence, and we certainly will not have it. Similarly, if private individuals and corporations leave the financial support of universities to governments, they are in a poor position to object to increasing bureaucratisation and governmental interference throughout society.

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In conclusion, the issues which face the universities in Canada will not be easy to resolve and the years ahead are likely, if anything, to be more difficult than those we have been through since 1960. Hard times are not necessarily ennobling but often it is only in such times that difficult decisions about priorities are made. If, during the shifting winds and squalls ahead we adjust our course and trim our sails without losing sight of our fundamental goals, I am confident that our universities will emerge, perhaps leaner, but stronger.