

"A POLY WHAT?"

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by

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A POLY WHAT?

The title for my remarks comes from an interchange I experience several times a week. "Where do you work?" "I work at Ryerson." "What's that?" "Ryerson's a polytechnic." "A poly what?"

That's a minor irritant for me but it points to a major problem in our Canadian society. Two elections in the last few months have forced Canadians to look very carefully at what has happened to this country in the last decade. We have every reason to welcome the 80's because the 70's have not been that kind.

One does not need to indulge in the litany of Canada's problems. But we know that our capacity to produce cheaply and competitively, to be inventive and to impress the world with the results of our research and development, have not been characteristics of those years. We already know with some clarity that Canada cannot rely on selling its natural resources off, selling the control of its business and industry or count on the hope of cheap energy in order to face the future with assurance.

And so we face the 80's with some trepidation. In spite of the magnificent resources of this country, its space, its expanse of land and water, and most important of all, the extraordinary

collection of people from almost every culture on this earth, who have come in hope and are prepared to contribute skill and experience, we are not at all sure that the 80's will fulfill our expectations.

And we are puzzled by the dissonances of our condition. In a time when we have high youth unemployment we find ourselves bringing in plane-loads of young men and women from other countries who have the skills which our own young people lack. How can it be, we ask ourselves, that we cannot replace even the tool and die makers who will be retiring--to say nothing of supplying the need of such skilled people for any industrial expansion that might take place.

But, tool and die makers is just one small part of the problem. True we lack skilled tradesmen, but as well technicians and technologists, experts for middle management positions, in business, industry and in communications, and the service sector. Over the past quarter century we have essentially exploited the educational system of other countries in order to bring these skilled and professional people to our shores. And now we may be threatened by an emigration of able people. There are indications that people will move to those countries which are the most prosperous, such as West Germany, leaving Canada with an even greater lack of availability of those skills.

How could we find ourselves in this situation? First, because of our collective attitude. In Canada, we have not encouraged people to work with their hands as well as their heads. Perhaps there is an element of a frontier perception which encourages parents to advise young people to go into the professions rather than develop skills which might serve other levels of the employment pyramid. Perhaps it is our colonial mentality (our history of subservence to Great Britain and now to the United States), which allows us to accept a process of importing our technologists from the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries and our technology from the United States. However, we know that this simply will not be good enough for the future.

Secondly, there is a problem of educational structure. To put it as simply, even as simple mindedly as possible, we can no longer count on cheap energy, on low cost capital, on the technologies of other countries and the skilled people ^{from} other nations' educational systems. We now have to rely on our own skill, productivity and intelligence --both those who were born here and have come from other lands.

And we know we must do this in an increasingly competitive world which exclude Canada, of trade associations, [^]of countries with even cheaper labour costs, more accessible natural resources, of more restrained national trade policies. It is a race which will go to the most productive, the most inventive--indeed it will go to the industrial system which has driven out that disease within--slack.

And we seem so ill-prepared to do so. "A poly what?" Yes, a polytechnic. How extraordinary it is that other countries have looked to this higher level of expertise, what we might call degree-level preparation of people in the professions of engineering technology, in communications and in the service professions and

yet in Canada we have but one polytechnic. That is not to say that there is not a good deal of polytechnic activity going on in other institutions and in many universities. But, contrast this to the degree of concentration and purposefulness you find in Germany, France, Scandinavian countries, Australia, New Zealand or even the United States. It was just a decade ago that the United Kingdom realized the degree to which it was falling behind in terms of its development of business and industry and put its attention to the development of 33 polytechnics which stand beside its 43 universities. And, it also has some 500 colleges of further education.

We in Ontario, as the centre of the industrial economy of Canada, have but one polytechnic beside 15 universities and 22 colleges of applied arts and technology on 49 campuses. There seems to be a considerable lack of balance.

Why is this polytechnic education which I have suggested so important? First, because it recognizes the higher level of expertise and sophistication which must be present in the preparation of the men and women who are to play a major role in the world of business and industry in the days ahead. We cannot rely on the "by come or by chance" method of preparing people for that world. We need individuals who have a higher level of expertise in middle management, in technology, and unless we create institutions which will create an opportunity for young people to achieve this kind of training we will be sadly disadvantaged as we seek to compete with the rest of the world.

In other countries the educational system produces five technologists for every engineer. In Canada we produce five engineers for every technologist. Could it be that we are using engineers as technologists--and probably paying them as engineers and thereby raising the cost of the product we sell? Are we misusing peoples talents? Are we over-training people in a number of professional areas at an incredible cost to the tax payer and allowing the "dribble down theory" to operate. This allows people who have been highly trained to sink to whatever levels are needed at a particular point in time. If so, it will not be good enough in the 80's--when every cent invested in public sector education must be appropriately invested. (It now appears that it wasn't good enough in the 70's.)

A few years ago a number of experts came from many other countries to participate in an examination of the educational system of this country. Actually it was a look at all the provincial educational systems. However, the OECD, the organization of the well-to-do nations of this world, examined Canada's system and observed that in no country in the western world had there been such an extraordinary investment in education in terms of the percentage of Gross National Product, in no other country in the world had there been such an increase in the number of young people of school age in some kind of institution or another, but in no other country in the western world had they seen such a gap between the educational system and the hopes and expectations of that society in terms of its contribution to the economy and social well-being of that community. That is the gap which must be closed--and people realize it. A recent OISE survey of public attitudes towards education found that

parents expectation of secondary schools were clear. In terms of priority, 64.7% ranked job training and career preparation as first or second--almost three times the highest of any other curriculum objective.

It is true that the Ontario Government is making some response.

For example, there is an effort to develop employer-sponsored training and there are now committees being formed throughout Ontario. To some extent this is a development of the apprenticeship-like concept and industries across the province are being approached to participate more actively in the training of young people. However, there is still the great problem that industries who do train young people find that they are attracted by industries who don't and there seems to be no real advantage in supplying skills to ones' competitors. As well, there is still a sense that in an economy prone to high unemployment rates, our union movement should not become too overly enthusiastic about the infusion of young people into this system, (probably at some advantage to the employer.)

As well, there is a good deal of attention to these problems of properly trained manpower by the Ontario Manpower Commission under Mr. Don Pollock, whose recommendations I suspect will have a dramatic effect. The Senior and Continuing Education Division of the Ministry is involved, as well as the Council of Regents of the community colleges. In short, we have a great deal of well-meaning but fragmented and uncoordinated activity, but not as yet, concentrated, all-inclusive strategy for dealing with what is surely Ontario and Canada's major problem--the effective use of its youth. Most of all, neither industry or the trade union movement has been galvanized into commitment to intense involvement with the educational forces. Nor have we found an effective manpower trend planning

function which would form the basis for such a commitment. But a structured change in our educational system would be an excellent first step.

I am not going to suggest to you that we set up a whole new set of institutions called polytechnics across this province. I am fully aware of the cost of education of the investment we already have in existing institutions. I am even more aware of the fact that the demographic figures would indicate that we will have some difficulty in keeping those institutions filled in the days ahead. What I am suggesting is that we must make use of the skills and the intelligence of those who are involved in both universities and colleges and even more we must "second" people from the world of industry and business in order to create a sector--a sector of polytechnic education which will allow our young people the opportunity of competing with those throughout the rest of the world in achieving the skills and capacities that will allow this country, not only to maintain a level of excitement in its economy standard of living in its society, but also allow it to contribute to the well-being of other parts of the deprived world.

I want to tell you a little bit about what polytechnic education is. "Polytechnic" means, of course, many skills, many arts. It is a commitment to a host of professional skills. At Ryerson we have business and technology programs, journalism, radio and television arts, nursing, social services and early childhood education. It does not mean narrow job training. It is our hope at Ryerson we

are training young people for a career which will allow them to move into an employment area, use their skills to do many different kinds of jobs, and more important, that the education they receive will be a plateau from which they will be able to launch their continuing education commitment. Secondly, polytechnic education is the style of learning which encourages a coordination of learning for work and learning for living. For the days ahead, as Marshall McLuhan has point out, we will be learning a living. We would hope that by the stress we have put on arts and sciences that no young person will graduate without the tools to live a meaningful life. We want to create what E. Schumacher has termed "a technologist with a human face". We want to create businessmen who have a sense of social responsibility and ethic. We want to bring people into the world of communications who are just as concerned about the message as they are about the media. That is why we have a full arts division serving the students in every program. That is why it is important to have a theatre and dance program besides programs training students in hard technologies.

In all this the polytechnic has a particular advantage. It is this weaving of arts and professionally related courses, its focus on the practical as well as the theoretical, which produces a coordinated program for a young person and makes the polytechnic degree valuable.

We head a great deal about the Ph'D graduate driving a taxi. I have yet to find any taxi driver in this city with a Ph'D, but nonetheless, I am still hoping to meet this mythical figure. I think a much more important problem is the underemployment of highly trained professionals. We have not thought very carefully about how

we use the very expensive skills that we develop in our schools, colleges, universities. Underemployment is debilitating for the individual as it is expensive for society. In the past when we had lots of resources and lots of money we could misuse those talents, but in the future it will be the kind of slack which makes us uncompetitive, our standard of living impossible to maintain.

We recently took a survey of the students who graduated from Ryerson just last June. They took a survey a mere four months after they had graduated and discovered that less than 7% were looking for work. Over 80% have a job in the field of work they have been trained, another 10% had decided to go on to post-graduate education. After four months, that record is quite extraordinary

As well as that we have advisory councils for every single one of our programs, which helps us not only to develop our programs but also to evaluate and assess what we are doing. The men on these councils are the "who's who" of the industry they represent. We are told that Ryerson produces the graduate who can work on the first day he arrives at a particular plant, office, or organization. That is the measure of our real sense of success.

We feel very strongly that Ryerson represents a form of education which is appropriate at this time in Canada's history. We are convinced that unless we provide this kind of opportunity Canada will not be able to face the 80's with much sense of well-being. It is time for Ontario and Canada to invest in its youth. No more cheap energy; no more cheap capital; no more riding on the educational systems and the research and intelligence of others.

~~There is no doubt in my mind that we could save a great deal of money and effort if our educational system was made sufficiently flexible then much more emphasis could be put on family education~~

concern and individuals live longer and want to remain as contributing figures in our society. Certainly it means that we must make a commitment to interrupted education at various points in peoples lives and this, of course, means that we must look carefully at the question of paid educational leave. I said a few moments ago that the trade union movement has not shown a great deal of enthusiasm for work/learning patterns which bring young people into the work place, but that is understandable if it means less employment or fewer opportunities for those who are in transit through their work careers. However, if we can include within this pattern some recognition that people will have an opportunity to interrupt their work with learning at appropriate points throughout their lives I think that this would be a major breakthrough. It is certainly a policy which is attracting attention in Europe--they are much farther ahead than we are.

Yet, it is a message of hope. A new style of educational opportunity which recognizes the individual learning needs of students, encourages a style of interrupted, intensive, purposeful schooling, stresses the delight of work of hand and head, and provides a level of qualitative experience for those who will serve the business and industrial society of our province and our country.

But paramount in changing attitudes and revising the structure of education is the health and well-being of our only polytechnic.

Thank God we are receiving help from our friends--Mr. Gordon Inns, of CJRT Bell Canada and Mary Alice Steward, who could not attend, both Directors of The Canadian Club, Tom Grindley, from The Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Jim Anderson, President of McKim Advertising and Colin Graham, partner in Clarkson, Gordon & Co. and many others--

have launched a 10 million dollar campaign. For the first time we are approaching the private sector. We have reason to expect a positive response, so that we can provide graduates who are able to contribute to a strong, viable Ontario and a competitive Canada.

As Jim Ham of the University of Toronto states on many occasions, in the 80's we must live by our wits. The young people I meet are prepared to accept that decision--please give them the tools.