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And what about university administrators, Tom?

A critical comment on the Symons Report

During the last years of the 1960's English Canadian universities and colleges turned their attention from the causes and crusades of other countries to the home front. There, armed with a new national liberation analysis, they began to examine the historic and contemporary dimensions of Canada's chronic colonial status. The message soon became clear. National liberation must start at home.

Nowhere was this homely truth more evident than in the country's academies, where Canada's colleges and universities were being staffed increasingly by non-Canadians and the curriculum by subject and author reflected the growing presence of these *New Romans.*[1] Soon books, articles, conferences and seminars described and analysed the causes and future effects of this crucial trend in the composition and curriculum of our universities. *The Struggle For Canadian Universities*[2] had begun and threatened to become the divisive political issue of the 1970's.

Few people would fault the uncharacteristic despatch with which Canadian college and university administrators responded to the Canadian Studies controversy. The nature of their response, however, was more typically Canadian. In June 1972, after only a few years of heated public debate, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (A.U.C.C.), appointed a commission, headed by one of its own, T. H. B. Symons, the founding president of Trent University "to study, report and make recommendations upon the state of teaching and research in various fields of study relating to Canada at Canadian Universities." Over three years later, two of the projected four volumes appeared.

This report, *To Know Ourselves,*[3] has scarcely received a flattering reception,[4] despite the introductory boast of Larkin Kerwin, Rector of Laval University and (1975) president of the A.U.C.C. that this was "the most significant examination of Canadian Studies since the Massey *Report.*"[5] Yet the report deserves closer attention if only to expose its deficiencies. On the more positive side, the Symons *Report* is probably the most complete statistical description of the staff and resources engaged in Canadian Studies at our universities and colleges. Moreover it is full of useful ideas and suggestions for the amelioration of programs, courses and resources in Canadian Studies.

Far from producing the narrow, claustrophobic report that some feared, Symons defines Canadian Studies in the broadest possible terms. He examines science and technology with the same care as the humanities and the social sciences and, throughout the 343 long and wide pages of the report, he argues for placing Canadian concerns at the core of our university curriculum. In his words, not only do Canadian universities and colleges have a duty to broaden and deepen their own society's level of self knowledge, but they have an obligation to investigate and report to the international scholarly community on the large physical and human heritage entrusted to their care. And who other than Canadians are better placed to do the necessary research and reporting? To Symons, it is simply a question of stewardship and good housekeeping.

The implications of Symons' rationale for Canadian Studies are far reaching. They ought also to quiet the more extreme fears of non-nationals. For Symons calls not for a diminution of our study of other societies, but an expansion of our knowledge of the international context of our society's past and present commitments. More specifically, Symons argues for greater Canadian concentration on American, British, French, Commonwealth and Francophone studies in our universities, and the extension of Canada's present international academic exchange agreements to improve disciplines which might benefit from comparative analysis. In other words this is a positive, expansionist report not an isolationist document. Indeed, some disappointed nationalists have called it, not without some justification, the "Uncle Tom" Symons *Report.*

Yet the report does not ignore some of the more contentious subjects associated with the struggle for our universities. The high proportion of non-Canadian staff and students, the latter particularly in some graduate programs, is documented, discipline by discipline and region by region. While Symons offers no explanation as to how or why this situation developed or was allowed to develop in Canada,

he does relate it to the lamentable state of Canadian Studies in many disciplines. He also dismisses the fragile defence of the non-nationals' apologists who seemed to have believed that the massive importation of Americans, often from only one of their many graduate schools, was nothing short of a missionary operation designed to save Canada from darkest parochialism. Yet Symons offers few remedies, save perhaps for the medical profession where the large influx of non-Americans has obviously alarmed nativists.

The report does have its villains however. Despite the fact that higher education is a jealously guarded Provincial jurisdiction, in this report the Federal Government plays the part of the cruel stepfather whose cramped vision, unproductive bureaucracy and parsimonious attitude have deprived universities of the resources necessary to develop sound programs of Canadian Studies. And so, to Symons, the remedy is relatively obvious. Since Canadian Studies are presently starved for money, only a large infusion of public and private funds will rescue them from their sorry plight. (One would hope and indeed expect Symons to draw up a rough cost estimate of his proposed package of palliatives.) But to avoid the dangerous dependence on government, he also feels universities ought to exploit more efficiently the private sector whose foundations at home and abroad are only too anxious to consider well prepared presentations requesting funds in support of worthy academic projects.

One would like to believe that a solution to the Canadian problem was as simple as Symons suggests. But those who possess even a passing knowledge of Canada's historic pattern of economic and cultural dependence or, for that matter, the administration of Canadian universities over the past decade and more, may be excused if they are not entirely convinced.

While universities may well help reform or re-direct their society, they also reflect the milieu in which they live. And it is difficult to discuss the state of Canadian Studies in our universities outside that larger socio-economic context. Not that one expected Symons to produce a global plan for national salvation. But he might have tried to place the contemporary problem in its historical setting. After all how can one expect the universities to be markedly different from the social and economic environment which has produced them?

More serious perhaps is the *Report's* failure to examine critically the administration of our universities. Perhaps it is too much to expect Symons to comment on the conduct of his former fellow rectors, principals and presidents, or put another way, the conduct of those who commissioned the report. Yet silence will not smother the

suspicion that university and college administrators have been far from vigilant and sympathetic toward the state of Canadian Studies over the past decade. For whatever the national composition of the academic staff members and their attitude toward Canadian Studies, chairmen, deans, vice-principals and presidents possessed the power and responsibility to have things otherwise. But how do we explain their failure? And do we have any reason to believe things have changed or would change even if governments and private donors provided the sums requested by Symons?

Few people could argue that Canadian universities and colleges were starved for funds during the decade of the 1960's. Yet Symons himself has demonstrated clearly in several instances that Canadian Studies, even in a traditional discipline such as Literature, made no substantial gains and indeed failed to keep pace with the general expansion which characterized the decade. Nor was this the result of a lack of undergraduate student interest where enrolment in Canadian courses consistently outpaced that in other areas. The plain truth, as Symons himself tells it, is that students were actively discouraged from pursuing graduate work in Canadian Studies. It did not take a commission to tell us that. But where were the administrators then? Did they lack funds? Or did they lack interest, courage and control?

Of course, many were preoccupied with other concerns they considered more pressing. For these they stinted neither time nor money as they busily created numerous hothouse institutes, centres and programs so unrelated to Canada that they sometimes imported the staff, students and resources. And when the funds ran out where were the first cuts made? At McGill, Agriculture and Museums probably suffered most. As a result, the Redpath Museum, the only natural history museum in the Province, closed its doors to the public. The importance of agriculture to Canadian life needs no further comment. Similar situations occurred elsewhere. Moreover, as Symons points out, in several universities junior Canadian staff, the last hired, are likely to be the first fired. Money may help save them but, given present university policy, they will be saved only if all others similarly threatened are similarly treated. One does not remedy one injustice by creating another. But in this situation how will more money benefit Canadian Studies? Or are Canadians and Canadian Studies simply to serve as useful hostages to save universities from a more critical analysis of their structures, policy, priorities and past performance?

Not all university administrators, however, followed a similar route. Some, who were considered provincial during the high days

of Chicago internationalism, placed their extra time and money into more defensible projects by creating areas of excellence which could be sustained by the human and physical resources of their region. Several departments of Memorial University are good examples of the wisdom of this decision. Consequently they are now in a position to serve their community more realistically and seek the financial support from it that they require and deserve. In other words, as things now stand, there is little evidence to believe that more money would automatically mean more or better Canadian Studies.

But we still do not know why university administrators have failed to provide the leadership necessary to ensure an adequate treatment of Canadian subjects. Within disciplines Symons suggests that there is a direct causal link between the number of non-nationals and the discipline's attitude toward Canadian Studies. If citizenship is a significant factor in explaining attitudes and actions within disciplines, is it not high time we possessed a similar analysis of our administrators? But throughout the report there is an assumption that university administrators are either guiltless, impotent or both. Perhaps, but then again, perhaps not. The point is that we ought to *know*. And Symons ought to have told us. Otherwise all the palliatives and prescriptions he suggests may produce nothing but temporary patchwork solutions.

And what about university structures? According to Symons, past government policies and structures, their cumbersome bureaucracy, expensive duplication, lack of planning and co-ordination have retarded their contribution to Canadian Studies. But has the record of Canadian universities and colleges been much or any better? For example, how have they distributed research, library, publication and travel money? How have committees controlled by non-nationals treated Canadian applications? How do university library purchasing, borrowing and cataloguing practices, geared to a North American market, affect the development of better Canadian Studies programs? To be more specific, what place and priority does the cataloguing department of the Library of Congress give to Canadian material? Presently books published in French only a few blocks away from McGill must wait months and sometimes years before their existence is recognized by the Library of Congress' Washington bureau. Moreover, books written by Canadians on Canadian subjects but related to the United States are classified as "United States" material and are placed in that location in the stacks. Universities' mindless acceptance of American systems, their refusal to recognize the existence of a border, often has had a detrimental effect on Canadian

Studies. This pattern of dependency is scarcely unique to Canadian universities. Yet no one would deny that they have been anything but humble and willing followers.

More to the point, is there any reason to believe that money advanced to universities for Canadian Studies will be well spent? In the past, universities have not always chosen the wisest ways of aiding Canadian Studies. Too often they have been interested in "high profile" but rather unproductive undertakings like the creation of centres with a physical location, secretary and letterhead while their archives, museums and libraries have been starved for funds. We need not look far for examples. McGill, for one, possesses embarrassingly large and good archival and museum holdings. But jurisdiction is divided among at least five competing repositories. Meanwhile there exists no list of McGill's holdings. And many valuable papers are still in boxes, unsorted, uncatalogued, inadequately housed and inaccessible. Access to other materials is possible only under the most difficult conditions. And it has been like this for many years. To those who complain that there are no funds for the proper care and utilization of these valuable Canadian materials, one might still ask if the University has ever tried to secure funds. Nor is it a certainty, even in these dark days of financial stringency, that university budgets are so tightly squeezed that administrators possess no flexibility. A glance at existing funding sources suggests that large sums of money are still available to support dubious educational experiments, but try to buy a book or journal for the library after the departmental book budget has run out! (The rigidity of university structures and the seeming inequities within them, of course, apply to those working in non-Canadian fields, too.) The truth is that Canadian Studies occupy a very low priority in the minds of university administrators. And the fact remains that much valuable work in Canadian Studies is being retarded until the mundane, costly but necessary, work is completed to put papers, books and aritfacts in a presentable order. Perhaps Canadian college and university administrators have been paragons of administrative efficiency and concern over the past decade or more, but sufficient evidence exists to suggest an opposite view. Consequently it does not seem unreasonable to expect Symons to have made a more searching examination of university policies and structures. And if he possessed any useful suggestions, and administrators were truly serious about their commitment to Canadian Studies, they would have ample opportunity to prove their good faith. Few people would argue that governments are blameless, far from it. But in this *Report* governments, particularly the Federal Government, have become an obvious and easy scapegoat. Universities might well first put their own houses in order.

Unfortunately there are no easy instant solutions to the plight of Canadian Studies. For their state and ultimate fate are too closely tied to the larger national issue, which is far from close to a resolution. While it is doubtlessly true that money might assist the present plight of Canadian Studies, yet money without committed, informed, academic leadership will produce only limited benefits. On the other hand, the possession of leadership, even deprived of further infusions of public and private funds, would go far toward mobilizing the vast, untapped physical and human resources at our doorstep. What about our university administrators, Tom?

notes

1. Al Purdy, ed., *The New Romans,* Edmonton: Hurtig, 1968.
2. Robin Matthews and James Steele, eds., *The Struggle for Canadian Universities,* Toronto: New Press, 1969.
3. T. H. B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves,* Vols. I & II, Ottawa: A.U.C.C., 1975.
4. See, *The Canadian Forum,* June-July 1976, pp. 115-124; *The Journal of Canadian Studies,* November 1976, pp. 50-72; *Queen's Quarterly,* Winter 1976, pp. 633-640.
5. Symons, *op. cit.*