

THE SCHOLAR AND THE STATE: A WORD OF CAUTION

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Until this year I have, when present, always looked forward to and enjoyed this feature of our annual rites of spring, the obligatory self-exposure of our President. But now, having just finished enjoying the highly prized honour of occupying that office and finding myself standing here, living proof of the Peter Principle, I very much doubt that the tradition of the presidential unbuttoning ought to have been perpetuated so long. My feeling of unease is caused by the difficulty of finding a subject to which I can address myself without leaving you utterly speechless, while adhering to my firm resolve to refrain, save in this single sentence, from mentioning the names of Arthur Meighen and Mackenzie King.

Being in need of guidance, and indeed inspiration, I naturally looked to the examples afforded by my illustrious predecessors. One possibility, for which there is good precedent, was to offer some of the findings of my current research but on reflection I decided that that must be saved for a book which the world breathlessly awaits. Perhaps, then, one could point to some new field to conquer in Canadian history and urge on the troops to attack. We have heard, and quite properly so, a number of such urgings, by presidents and others, to train our sights and our weaponry of scholarship on hitherto neglected sectors of the front, on social history, urban history, business history, the lives of lesser lights, to name but a few of the battle plans that have been proposed. We have also been invited to consider the efficiencies of computer technology and the uses of quantitative history, a kind of scholastic equivalent of the body count, to carry the military metaphor beyond the breaking point.

Regrettably, I have no new suggestions of that sort to make. The best I could think of along these lines was a defence of mere political history, upon which we Canadian historians have largely concentrated but which is now widely regarded as old-hat and not very fruitful. To do that would be splendidly perverse and reactionary. However, political history really needs no defence against its competitors and detractors; it will continue to be studied and written by some of us because it is simply too interesting and too important to be left to political scientists. Anyway, the distinctiveness of these various specialties is sometimes exaggerated. Each, after all, is but a sub-species of the one great, unruly beast which we are all engaged in trying to tame.

Perhaps, then, a pregnant pronouncement on one of the grand themes of our collective existence as Canadians could be offered. Might one, for example, light a lantern and go forth on still another quest for an honest Canadian identity, assuming that one can still use that noun in the singular in this context and that to be Canadian means *something* other than being doomed to a perpetual adolescence of wondering what it *does* mean? If one were to succeed in that he might at the same time make a constructive contribution to our bicultural dialogue (one hopes it is still that) and furnish a glimmer of hope that we may yet achieve a more satisfactory, less dependent relationship with the United States. But better men than I have wrestled with these weighty problems and doubtless will again, so I forbear.

A suitably more modest purpose was suggested by the fact that this is the fiftieth Annual Meeting of our Association. What could be more fitting for such an occasion than a jubilee history of the C.H.A. from its humble beginnings to its present affluent condition and high estate? But that idea was put aside as well. It would be unfair to spoil it for the eager master's candidate, in desperate search of a subject, who may turn up some day now that intellectual history is in fashion.

One other possibility was contemplated, but not very seriously. The first presidential address I heard at an annual meeting of this association, twenty-six years ago, was entitled "Where Stands Canadian History?" It recounted in some detail and viewed with some satisfaction the accomplishments of the historians of Canada up until that time. Might it be appropriate to attempt the same sort of historiographical survey and appreciation for the quarter of a century since then? Clearly it would not be. The number of workers and their gross historical product (no value judgment intended) have increased so greatly that in a single short paper one could offer little more than a catalogue which would say nothing to those who specialize in Canadian history and would bore to distraction those who do not.

In any case, there may be less reason to point with pride to what has been done, worthy though it is, than to welcome what is surely beginning to occur - a significant broadening and enrichment of Canadian historical research and writing. The signs of this are to be seen in some works recently published, in some endeavours now in progress and especially in the current generation of graduate students who, unless I am much mistaken, give promise of carrying our cultivation of the domain far beyond the relatively restricted portions of it in which most of us have laboured thus far. So we can reasonably entertain large expectations, not only for a continued expansion of quantity but for greater variety and higher quality in the contributions of those whose main interest is the history of our country.

Such optimism, however, needs to be tempered by the fact that we have reached this threshold of promise at a moment when some ominous danger signals have appeared,

when what is left of our tradition of disinterested scholarship is threatened in a way that should be of concern to those in all the learned disciplines. It may be of particular concern to certain disciplines, including our own, and not alone to historians *of* Canada but also, and in some ways especially, to those other historians *in* Canada whose major scholarly interests lie elsewhere. Thus, coming at last to what I do want to say, in an effort to be relevant, if not very original in either the spirit or substance of my remarks, I am going to do a little viewing with alarm. The fears I feel may be exaggerated, possibly unsupported by much in the way of objective evidence, but what is a presidential address for if not to enable a man to say what is on his mind?

The alarm is occasioned by the concept of "relevance" itself, by the implications of the way in which it is being, and will increasingly be, made to serve as a criterion in judging the worth and performance of the scholarly community. The demand for more "relevance" in academe has usually been associated with an element among the students, with the support, active or tacit, of a number of faculty members. Some of these, one supposes the majority of the actively dissatisfied students (I speak of those whose main desire is "relevance," not of those who complain of indifferent teachers and other such minor evils) seem to want mainly a curriculum that is more "with it," more current and topical in content, geared to contemporary social problems and perhaps less structured in form. There should be no great difficulty in satisfying the imagined needs of such folk; they can be directed to major in sociology or cultural anthropology. The others, a minority now apparently diminishing in number or at least in noisiness, have wished to politicize and radicalize the universities which, in their opinion, should become weapons in an ideological struggle, taking definite positions on controversial public issues, conducting only research that is consistent with those positions and staffing their faculties with politically acceptable academics. This kind of subversion the universities can cope with, provided they recognize it for what it is and as long as it does not escalate into physical intimidation or violence. In any event it is a threat that appears to be receding, at least for the time being.

A far more insistent and insidious pressure for "relevance" in a somewhat different sense, a pressure less easily resisted and controlled by the universities, comes not from within (although some academics do not find it very disturbing) but from the external society and from governments expressing what they judge to be its mood and will. This is nothing new, of course, for what there ever was of the ivory tower all but disappeared long ago with the growth in number and prominence of the professional colleges, the increasing volume of applied, utilitarian, mission-oriented research, and the progressively heavier and more exclusive reliance of the universities on public funds. But the pressure is now being intensified and will continue to be, with a corresponding loss to the universities of the autonomy they once enjoyed, as

governments assert their power to intervene and make decisions which in an earlier day they would neither have wished nor presumed to make. Education having been oversold during the past fifteen or twenty years as a cure for all ills, a protection against all hazards, we are now witnessing the predictable reaction, a growing skepticism about the utility and a rising impatience with the costs of an educational system whose elephantine growth and Byzantine elaboration have been such striking features of that period. With such vast sums of public money invested in it and required each year for its operation, it is not altogether surprising that what has become known as "the knowledge industry", in the ill-considered terminology of some academic statesmen, should be expected to function as a well regulated industry does by those who have subscribed the capital and who pay the overhead costs. They demand economy, they expect efficiency, they urge rationalization. They suspect, not without cause, that their investment is not being altogether well managed and that their yearly contributions are not being spent to the best possible effect. And their mounting complaints about the costs of the system are heightened even more by the fact that education is losing its pride of place in the public esteem and in the scale of priorities adopted by governments when it comes to spending the public treasure. Other needs seem more and more urgent, new or newly magnified problems demand increasing attention and expenditure by the state. Poverty and pollution, health services and social security, urban congestion and renewal, such matters and many others press their claims for action and for funds. Meanwhile, the familiar, somewhat naive faith in the slow but sure curative powers of education is losing some of its force. Action now, not a promissory note of questionable worth, is being demanded.

Although this more critical scrutiny of the educational system and its cost is being brought to bear at all levels, the universities are particularly inviting targets, as an attentive reader of, say, the *Globe and Mail* or the *Winnipeg Free Press* will have noticed. For one thing, university campuses are such visible aggregations of capital equipment, such conspicuous monuments to the generosity of the taxpayer. For another, they are "elitist" institutions catering to a privileged minority and enjoying substantial immunity from public control. Their operations are widely believed to be conducted in a grossly inefficient manner, with the "plant" being under-employed for much of the year, the professors being paid unconscionably high salaries for spending a few hours each week in the classroom, and much time being devoted to the performance of research and the preparation of publications for which there is no need and which serve no socially useful purpose. It is not that the traditional pride of the community in the universities has disappeared but it has lessened and is now qualified by the belief that institutions which need and receive such great subventions from the public purse must be brought more thoroughly under public control. When universities were relatively few in number, small in size and inexpensive to maintain, the paradox was generally accepted that he who paid the piper did not call the tune of

university policy, that within the limits of the total financial support afforded by the public treasury the tune would be called by those who did the piping. Acceptance of that view, so vital to the preservation of the kind of academic freedom we have known, has diminished, is diminishing and is unlikely to increase. Step by step, decisions which would formerly have been regarded as ones that could only properly be made within and by the academic fraternity are going to be imposed from outside as the price exacted for the high levels of subsidization to which the universities have become accustomed and which they will continue to require. This may, of course, lead to some salutary reform of the universities, where incompetence, negligence, empire building and an imprudent disregard for reasonable economy are not entirely unheard of. But the dangers of added interference by the state far outweigh its possible benefits. Presumably we have not yet reached the stage where most provincial leaders believe what one premier in effect stated several years ago, that a university is no different from a department of government as far as such matters as budgetary autonomy are concerned, that its estimates should be subject to the same detailed scrutiny by the cabinet and legislature as are those of any branch of the provincial administration. This overlooked what one would have thought was the important distinction that a university does not exist, as do departments of state, to administer government policy. But even though that view of the relationship is not yet widely voiced, the general tendency is towards its tacit acceptance. Ministers of the crown will continue to express their distaste for interfering in the affairs of the universities but they will find it possible to overcome that distaste. As for university administrators and academics, they will protest but, for the most part, will see the logic of the situation and fall in line, realizing that to bite the hand that feeds one is not the most expedient means of assuring oneself of an ample diet.

That forecast of the probable response from university people may be too pessimistic - I hope so - as, indeed, may be my estimate of the seriousness of the problem as a whole, but it is not easy at the moment to find many grounds for optimism. What the universities do and how they do it, the relevance of what they do to national goals or social needs as defined by governments in response either to expert opinion or public pressure, in these essentially academic matters the independence of the universities is being gradually but steadily eroded.

The implications of this general process for academic freedom and disinterested scholarship are enormous and unsettling, and in no way more so than with regard to the conduct and support of research. Of all the activities of that huge conglomerate known as "the knowledge of industry" none occupies a place of such central importance, none is surrounded with such glamour or enjoys as much prestige as the research function, "the fourth R" as it has been called. Like leaves on a warm spring day, research centres and institutes sprout profusely, in every imaginable shape, size

and texture. What goes on in many of them is not altogether clear but if it can be called research, or especially nowadays interdisciplinary, team research, it is almost automatically assumed to be worth doing. Academics who shun research and perversely regard mere teaching as their "own work" do so at their peril; they do not show up well in the President's Report and are apt to receive short shrift when promotions and merit increases are bestowed in the annual lottery. There are organizations to promote research, coordinate research and to do research on research. The solution to every conceivable problem, and to some that seem inconceivable, is thought to lie in more research. If a computation were made of the total man-hours devoted in a year to what is or is said to be research in universities, government departments and agencies, business and industry, labour unions and private bodies of infinite number and variety, the figure would stagger the imagination. In fact it is almost certainly safe to say that research into that is going on at this very moment.

Of course in our profession we are affected only moderately by this modern mania for research. It is perhaps not so much that we lack the compulsion to do it as that, whether we are deficient in enterprise and ingenuity or are limited by the nature of our craft, few of us have yet succeeded in devising undertakings of such magnitude and costliness as to make ourselves research entrepreneurs in the truly grand manner. Possibly the effect of looking back all the time is to make us backward and by and large we are a group of primitives, wielding our scissors and spreading our paste. We are, it is true, striving to bring ourselves up to date and even in our discipline, in this culturally lagging land, it is becoming difficult to hold one's head high unless one enjoys a master-servant relationship with at least a single research assistant. Even so, our organization for research, our expenditure on research, the mass of the written product of our research, large though these all are when compared with what they used to be, are but insignificant parts, in scale if not in value, of the total research picture.

Looking at that picture as a whole, it is hard to stifle the fear that our age runs the risk of being gripped by a mindless craze for the accumulation of data, the pursuit and capture of information that must be known simply because it is there and because modern technology makes possible its acquisition, storage and ready transmission. The sterility and pointlessness of much of this effort, the conquest of these imagined Everests of the intellect that turn out to be molehills, are reminiscent of the mental antics of some of the medieval schoolmen, even though we know now that there are no angels to dance on the head of a pin. The end result of all this activity cannot be foretold but one is bound to wonder whether it may lead, not to understanding but to obfuscation, not to wise judgment and intelligent action but to paralysis, and finally to suffocation.

And yet, while one may wax ironic about this driving urge for more and still more research, may regard much of what is done, taking all fields of learning together, as trivial, redundant, a laboured documentation of the obvious or a mere dialogue between specialists within ever narrowing ranges of knowledge, to carry this line of thought too far would be absurd. Well conceived and well conducted research is obviously necessary if we are to carry on the civilized work of seeking and transmitting knowledge, which we engage in, beyond considerations of position, of promotion, of reputation or of royalties, ultimately as an act of faith. Of course the need for research is nowhere seriously in question. The question is whether what remains of the freedom of the scholar in doing his research will survive. If I am correct in believing that it is threatened, the threat comes from essentially the same factors that are causing the more direct intervention in the affairs of the universities by the state, from the same demands for economy, efficiency, rationalization and relevance, although in the case of research it is, in Canada, the federal rather than the provincial authority that is mainly concerned.

As we all know, a very large proportion of the funds for support of research comes from public sources and the sums involved are substantial indeed. They may not be sufficient - presumably most of us would say that the humanities and social sciences are still undernourished and even our comparatively wealthy brothers in the natural sciences are not satisfied - but, compared to what they were not so many years ago, their size is impressive. At any rate, as a significant proportion of the total outlay for maintaining the "knowledge industry" they have become sufficiently big to produce the belief that their use must be more effectively managed, that planning and coordination must replace the present more or less helter-skelter appropriation and spending of the available funds. While various private or semi-public bodies such as the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada and the Science Council of Canada are addressing themselves to this subject, the main impulse for reform and rationalization will come, directly or indirectly, from governments, which in all probability will interest themselves more than in the past, not only in the efficiency and order with which research is carried on, but also in the kinds of research that receive public support. To conjure up the spectre of a rigid system of state control of research looming just ahead would at this stage doubtless be to exaggerate but the underlying trend seems likely to be in that direction. In the first volume of the Lamontagne Report, the report of the Senate Special Committee on Science Policy, there is a section pouring a good deal of scorn on the concept of the Republic of Science, the belief that, in the words of Michael Polanyi which the Report quotes in order to deride, "the pursuit of science by independent self-coordinated initiatives assure [sic] the most efficient possible organization of scientific progress."⁽¹⁾ What the proponents of the Republic of Science are really asking for, the Report asserts with mingled incredulity and indignation, is "more public money and less public

control."⁽²⁾ And there is the issue in a nutshell. Can it, should it, any longer be expected, given the present levels and projected growth of public financial support, that not only scientists but other research scholars will be left free to do their work and thus serve the public interest according to their lights? Answering in the negative, the Lamontagne Report goes on to say:

The scientist will have to accept the fact that most research activities have become political in the best sense of that word and must be guided by national goals and subjected to systematic review in the light of these objectives. . . .

In other words, the politician and the scientist must learn to become partners. They must not only live together but work together and help each other to serve society better. . . . The researcher will of course have to remain a true scientist but he will also become a servant of the public with important social functions to fulfill. This [sic] politician will have to remain the guardian of the public interest but he will also become more aware that scientific progress needs a climate of freedom.⁽³⁾

How neat and how nice, the politician as "*the* guardian of the public interest" defining that interest for the scientist who will be expected to react accordingly. The same sort of conception of a planned, ordered, rationalized, coordinated and comprehensive public policy for science is to be found in some of the productions of the Science Council of Canada. And there is also, though lip-service is paid to the importance of pure, curiosity-motivated research, the same emphasis on the need for more applied, more mission-oriented research relevant to social needs and national goals.

It is true, certainly, that the Lamontagne Report and the various reports of the Science Council are not, as far as one knows, expressions of government policy, not yet anyway, but it would be foolish not to see in them possible omens of the shape of things to come. It is also true that they concern themselves for the most part with the natural sciences and technology. However, the Senate committee has some things to say about the social sciences and humanities in its first volume and will probably have more in the next, while the Science Council has thoughtfully provided a list of six broad national goals as a framework for policy, goals to which only the devil could object and the attainment of which has at least as much to do with research in the humanities and social sciences as in those branches of learning that are ostensibly its main concern.⁽⁴⁾

The question we are going to have to face, I think, is whether all university research is eventually and gradually to be integrated into some great plan or policy which may in the symmetrical beauty and ordered logic of its theoretical design be a bureaucrat's dream but which in its actual operation might prove to be a scholar's nightmare. Are we, in return for having our research funded out of the public purse, to be expected to adhere to guidelines or directives as to what research we shall do and how we shall do it, guidelines formulated by government or its agencies according to its definition of the needs of the state and society? Are there to be officially designated priorities for research with the probability and amount of the financial assistance accorded being

related to the current social relevance and possible utility of the project concerned? If something like this is in fact the wave of the future, where then will stand history and historians in Canada?

I suppose we might react to such a situation in various ways. Some, believing that history is or can be a "policy science," might respond as, unless I am wrong, some of our colleagues in the social sciences are preparing to respond, that is, by accepting the inevitability of officially defined research needs and priorities and doing the kinds of relevant research that are desired, research that can be fed into the decision making process of government in the hope that the decisions made will thereby be improved. As I believe these social scientists see it, in no other way can the funding of their research be guaranteed. How successfully could we compete with other disciplines in such a test of relevance and usefulness, if it ever came to that? It is realistic to admit that we would not fare very well, that our "input," as we modern men say, would not seem very impressive measured against that of others whose types of expertise are currently more fashionable, more highly regarded, or more germane to the present and to the making of public policy. Experience, which history is all about, is now at something of a discount compared with psychological and sociological measurement as a means of understanding and identifying ourselves, which has always been the true relevance of history. In history there is no valid distinction between pure and applied research; it is all pure, how pure no one knows as well as we, and is not particularly well suited to the solving of practical problems. But this kind of purity may not be an asset if practicality of application is to become a criterion in the apportionment of research grants.

I am not suggesting that next year or the year after the Canada Council, from which we historians have benefited so much, will stop supporting historical research that is not clearly and immediately "relevant." But in the long run it is possible that we shall be treated less generously or that, at the very least, those may suffer whose scholarly interests are not in the recent past, especially the recent Canadian past, or in those aspects of the past that appear to be directly related to present issues. That would be exceedingly unfortunate, although, should it happen, it need not necessarily spell total disaster. After all, a great deal of excellent historical research used to be done in the days when scholars had to pay a large part of their expenses out of their own pockets, at a time when the pockets of academics were a lot less lavishly lined than they are at present. Still, the proposition that the only good scholar is a poor scholar is preposterous, no matter how one interprets it, just as much so as the notion is pernicious that research is impossible unless someone else foots the entire bill. We must have continued and expanded support for good research if our profession is to grow and do its work more effectively, and if the promising developments alluded to near the beginning of these remarks are not to be inhibited. But neither we nor others

can afford to have it at the cost of becoming in some sense handmaidens of the state - would "eunuchs" be a better word? - attuning our research efforts to a prescribed order of priorities, a patly defined list of goals, in the belief that all that matters is dollars and lots of them.

It is not, needless to say, a question of trying to preserve the *status quo* in its entirety; to attempt that is unwise, to succeed, impossible. It is a matter of perceiving and weighing the probable consequences of changes proposed and of trying to order reform in such a way that what is worth preserving will be preserved. To my mind that means in the present circumstances that what is needed is a re-affirmation of the principle that, as far as the world of scholarship is concerned, the public interest is best served by protecting to the greatest possible extent the freedom of the scholar, provided that it is coupled with a sober sense of his responsibility (which, scholars being human, will not always be discharged) to use that freedom, and with it the public funds that support him, judiciously and well.

That no doubt sounds trite and also old fashioned, for freedom and responsibility are not as much admired or desired as they once were. Nevertheless, it strikes me that this is the most vital issue that confronts us: not whether our universities will remain Canadian, with sufficient majorities of Canadians on their faculty rosters and sufficient Canadian content in their courses, important though that issue unquestionably is; but whether they will remain as autonomous as universities should be and whether the scholars who inhabit them will be encouraged and be free to engage in that spirited, wide-ranging, uninhibited and vigorously critical research which alone can enable us to make our contribution in stimulating the lively, creative intellectual life to which any civilized nation should aspire.

NOTES

1. Canada, *A Science Policy for Canada. Report of the Senate Special Committee on Science Policy* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer for Canada, 1970), p. 268.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

4. Science Council of Canada, *Towards a National Science Policy for Canada. Report No. 4* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer for Canada, 1968) p. 13.