

news from CUASA

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Editor: Barry Rutland

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UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS CO-OPTED BY QUEEN'S PARK?

*Les Copley
President*

On November 28, Dr. Bette Stephenson, Minister of Colleges and Universities, announced the formation of a committee to revise the objectives of Ontario's universities so that they will relate more closely to current funding levels.

CUASA has already publicly condemned this action in a press release issued the same day. However, I think that it is important that everyone have as clear a picture as possible of the context within which the announcement was made and of the implications for the system which may follow from it. To provide that picture, I must review the events that led up to the announcement. The review will also serve a second purpose: it will demonstrate the ease with which the government manipulated COU and OCUA and out-flanked its opposition critics.

In late August, university presidents and chairmen of boards of governors presented Premier Davis with a bleak description of the damage already done and likely to be done in the future as a result of persistent underfunding of the university system. The Premier reacted by challenging COU to prepare a brief on how to correct the situation for submission by the end of October.

Shortly after this encounter, OCUA issued the 1980 version of its annual brief on the Ontario university system. In fact, this year there were two briefs. The first, "System Rationalization", suggests that the universities must take urgent action to ensure that they make optimum use of their diminishing resources. The second, "A Financial Analysis of the Ontario University System", reveals just how rapidly these resources are diminishing. It documents a decade of government neglect of Ontario's universities in exhaustive and depressing detail.

These two documents, plus earlier discussions within and between COU and OCUA, clearly define the context that the university presidents were working within while preparing their brief for the Premier. On the one hand, there was growing public awareness of the plight of Ontario's universities. The fact that the universities are hurting, and hurting badly, as a result of government underfunding, had been established. On the other hand, in calling for increased rationalization of the system, OCUA also appeared to view the probability of the government significantly increasing its grant to the universities as being vanishingly small. This latter consideration provides a possible explanation, but certainly not an excuse, for the action the presidents ultimately took.

On November 14, the presidents presented their brief to the Premier. In it they restate the basic problem: the university system in Ontario is in imminent danger of disintegration under the strain of trying to meet publicly stated and accepted objectives with totally inadequate resources. They then provide the obvious and preferred solution: the government should restore university funding to a level that will allow current expectations of the system to be met. However, and this is a very critical however, they also admit that they do not really expect the government to adopt this route. In fact, they follow up their "preferred solution" by proposing a procedure for coping with an anticipated shortfall between the financial resources needed if universities are to continue to meet current objectives and those that will actually be available.

The basic components of the proposal are as follows:

1. immediate consideration to be given to "articulating revised objectives and levels of activity consistent with the expected level of funding";
2. "a modification of the funding formula to encourage both voluntary institutional adjustments and better inter-university cooperation";
3. "a clearer definition of the joint roles of individual institutions, COU, OCUA, and MCU;
4. the formation of a tripartite committee composed of COU, OCUA and MCU representatives to consider the preceding three points in further depth and "bring forward specific recommendations relating objectives and funding to each other".

To their credit, the presidents also pointed out that this approach will be feasible only if funding is sustained at "a relatively high level for a period of years".

At first sight, the most irritating feature of their proposal is that the executive heads evidently saw no role to be played by faculty, staff, or students in the reshaping of Ontario's university system. Apparently they forgot that it is the faculty who design the programmes, who plan and teach the courses, who do the research, and who perform the community service, all of which constitute the publicly-stated objectives of the system. Similarly, they forgot that support staff have committed their careers to furthering higher education in this province and that students have legitimate views and concerns about the accessibility and quality of the education provided by Ontario's universities. Their arrogance and short-sightedness is best-illustrated by the final sentence in their brief. In it they suggest a deadline for the tripartite committee to report and a second deadline for responding to the report. However, the only response that they feel the government need solicit or entertain is theirs.

One's attention is quickly distracted from the studied insult to the university community that this brief delivers, to the tactical and strategic folly that it represents. In proposing the formation of the tripartite committee, the executive heads have provided a mechanism for diverting public attention from the government's record of woeful neglect of Ontario's universities, and for silencing the presidents, and the boards of governors that they represent, as critics of that record. Moreover, such a committee, suitably chosen, can legitimize the claim that it is not the level of funding but the level of activity within the system that is at fault for its current lamentable state. Finally, it should be noted that the presidents' proposal also constituted an expression of lack of confidence in the OCUA as government's advisor on higher education. In view of the fact that the press had at long last picked up on OCUA's criticism of the level of university funding, a tacit repudiation of OCUA by the universities could only be of great political use to the government.

Premier Davis, facing an election in the Spring, quickly recognized the opportunity that was being offered. On November 18, only four days after receiving the presidents' brief, the Minister announced in the legislature that a "broadly-based committee will be struck to study the role of the universities in Ontario", with terms of reference and membership to be announced at a later date. This automatically meant, among other things, that the presidents' "preferred solution", increased funding, was not acceptable to the government.

On November 21, the OCUFA executive unanimously passed a motion which reads in part: "that an urgent demand be presented immediately to the Ontario Government and other involved parties, that there be full faculty association representation on the committee now being formed to review the Ontario university system ...".

On the same date, I sent OCUFA a telegram supporting the executive's motion and urging vigorous action. I did so with some misgivings since it was already clear what the implications of such a committee were. However, if such a committee was inevitable, then it should be at least one with strong representation from the province's professoriate.

On November 24, OCUFA representatives met with the Minister to present their demand. The Minister stated that COU, OCUA and MCU will not, in fact, be represented on the committee. Rather, COU, OCUA, and the Premier's Office will each be requested to submit a list of nominees. From these lists the Minister will name the committee who will act in the role of "interested citizens". She argued that, as OCUFA is a "special interest group", it would not be appropriate for it to make nominations. It was later learned that COU was asked for and submitted three names (none of them academic colleagues) to the Minister, while OCUA was asked for and submitted five names (one of whom, a former partner in a prominent Toronto law firm, has very recently become a full-time academic at York University).

At this point, our worst fears were beginning to look more and more justifiable. It only remained to receive the Minister's final announcement, which was made in the legislature on November 28. The terms of reference of the committee are:

- "to develop a public statement of objectives for Ontario universities in the 1980's expressed in operational terms";
- "to relate the cost of meeting these objectives to funding levels";
- "to consider modifications to the funding mechanism which would provide appropriate processes to encourage voluntary institutional adjustments and inter-institutional cooperation to meet these objectives";
- "to define more clearly the appropriate joint roles of the individual institutions, the Council of Ontario Universities, the Ontario Council on University Affairs, and the Government of Ontario";
- "to recommend such other policy changes as are judged likely to improve the ability of the Ontario universities to meet the agreed upon objectives".

As for the "broadly-based" membership of the committee, the Minister named five government officials, three university presidents, and, as Sarah Shorten, President of OCUFA has accurately characterized them, five messengers from the corporate elite. The chairman of the committee is Dr. H.K. Fisher, Deputy Minister of Education and of Colleges and Universities.

Finally, the Minister set February 28, 1981, as the deadline for a preliminary report, and June 30, 1981, as the deadline for a final report from her committee. She also alludes to discussions with the university community and the public at large which will be carried out between these two dates. The allusion does not make clear whether the preliminary report will be made public in order to facilitate the discussions nor does it specify who will represent the university community or, for that matter, the general public. Based on past experience, university faculty, staff and students face a stiff battle if they wish to participate.

I have already indicated, both in this report and in the CUASA press release, the threat to Ontario's universities that I see this committee posing. Rather than repeat myself, I shall quote Professor Shorten from OCUFA's press release of November 28. "The stated purpose of this committee is to identify objectives for the Ontario university system in the '80's and to relate these objectives to funding available. Following nearly a decade of government underfunding, this is indeed ominous. The barely concealed agenda is in fact to weaken further an already damaged system".

I have also indicated that, through their arrogance and naivety, the executive heads are responsible in large part for the creation of the Minister's committee. On December 1, Professor Muni Frumhartz and I met with President Beckel to question the role played by the presidents and to ascertain what implications for the future he sees arising from the events I have related. Unfortunately, Dr. Beckel did not succeed in allaying any of our concerns about the future. He offered no explanation for the omission of faculty in the presidents' proposals. In fact, he had little in the way of explanation for any feature of those proposals.

He indicated that he has accepted the inevitability of continued underfunding and the corresponding need for retrenchment. However, he apparently does not perceive any particular threat to the universities in the Minister's actions and did not feel, for example, that the committee's preliminary report will necessarily influence the nature and significance of the OCUA Spring Hearings.

The questioning of Dr. Beckel on the implications of these events, particularly the academic implications, needs to be continued. Perhaps members of Senate, for example, will see fit to do so.

The role I foresee for CUASA in the next few months is not as easily accomplished as it is to state: we must join locally with the student and other staff associations on campus, and provincially with OCUFA and our sister faculty associations, in continuing the fight against underfunding. We must convince the citizens of Ontario that they own a university system that they can and should be proud of, that it is one of their most important resources and, therefore, one that should not be recklessly depleted. With a provincial election in the offing, it is necessary for Carleton academic staff, through CUASA, and as individuals, to strive to make university underfunding a public concern.

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NEW LTDI PLAN APPROVED BY COUNCIL - Mike Fox, CUASA Benefits Chairman

The proposed LTDI Plan, outlined in the CUASA November Newsletter, was approved by Council at its meeting on November 21, 1980, and will take effect on January 1, 1981. Please note that this new plan is optional for members earning less than \$21,600 per annum. As premiums are required a month in advance, the increased premiums will be deducted from your December cheque.

As is normal practice in the insurance industry, to be eligible for the improved benefits, members must be at work when the new plan comes into effect.

CAUT ANNOUNCES THE 13TH ANNUAL J.H. STEWART REID MEMORIAL FELLOWSHIP FOR 1981-82

The J.H. Stewart Reid Memorial Fellowships have been established through voluntary contributions to honour the memory of the first Executive Secretary of CAUT.

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CLOSING DATE FOR APPLICATIONS: 27 February 1981

ANNOUNCEMENT OF AWARD: April 1981

For further information and application forms, write to:

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