

What does Democracy mean in Canada?

Does our education system discourage independent thought?

By Alex Keaveny

School again. Now classes are in and the thrills of re-entering the wonderful world of higher education run rampant in the minds of the restless many. This being the case it would seem appropriate to give some thought to the potential limits of the experience for which we have invested so much hard earned capital.

Most of us feel that a very important reason for our attending U.P.E.I. (or any other institute of learning) is because without a degree the prospects of our employment is about as likely as winning the lottery (ticket or no ticket). This reason alone sheds considerable wattage on the function of organized education in our society. Yet somehow even after begrudgingly accepting this reason we cling to the (perhaps foolish) belief that our education is nonetheless objective. This idea (or ideal) becomes harder to entertain the closer I look at the system of education itself, take for example one clue found within these hallowed halls of learning.

On a wall in the lobby of main building there hangs a plaque. On the plaque is written two paragraphs. The first paragraph tells of the history behind the renovations made to Main Building over the years, including the name of the politician (Former Premier Joe Ghiz) who ceremoniously reopened the building as it now stands, the second paragraph reads: "The reason that led Bishop Bernard MacDonald to build a college near Charlottetown - **the need for an institution where the youth of the island could be appropriately educated** - is still honored within these rejuvenated walls, a work of renewal made possible through the generous support of the government of Prince Edward Island and of many corporations, foundations, and private citizens."

Many of us walk by this plaque regularly, never giving its inscription the slightest consideration. But perhaps it is important that we take a closer look at what this simple plaque might reveal. For it is certain that whoever carefully chose and approved the existing wording may have revealed much of what the people who control this institution of learning regard as their role as administrators, and further sheds some light on the true function of U.P.E.I. within our society.

Upon a closer look we can read several conclusions from these few carefully selected phrases. The most obvious fact is that in the eyes of the administration it is important that the "youth" of the island, namely you and I, be appropriately educated. This suggests several things, one, that we need to be educated, in contrast to our educating ourselves, and two, revealing the fact that it is crucial that the world be interpreted for us by the "experts", so as to insure that we see the world the way we should, the appropriate way. This of course meaning the way our educators interpret the world.

On a more subtle level one can see that originally the hierarchy of the church had the power to control this education process, whereas now it is plain to see that the baton has been passed to the government in power which now has overwhelming control of our educative options. Now while it could be argued that the government in power is controlled by the people I would like you to ask yourself the following questions: (1) how often are you able to make decisions that determine public policy? Once every couple of years. (2) How many decisions are made by those in power that determine public policy? Many, many, decisions. (3) Do you feel well represented in "your" government? Did you want free trade? The GST? NAFTA? etc., also (4) are there many people like you in the government? Most politicians are members of the upper income group in society, most are professionals, not many students. (5) Do large corporations have considerable control or influence on the deci-



sions made in Ottawa? Is it coincidence that Irving Oil does not have to pay for the disposal of the Irving Whale? Or that Irving also was awarded a major defense contract in Saint John? Or that Irving (almost) received another grant from the government to open another business (this time a potato warehouse)? I think not.

Perhaps the biggest question that we should ask ourselves is why, if Canada is such a democracy, aren't its institutions controlled by its principal participants? Consider the U.P.E.I. senate, the body which decides academic matters including admission requirements, degree programs and what new courses are taught. While the students at U.P.E.I. comprise 79% of the total university population they have only 18% representation in the decisions that affect them the most. Why aren't students better represented to make the

decisions over what they can and cannot learn? Sure we can choose what courses or faculties we want to take or join, but we must choose from what is being offered and we have no real say on what courses will be available to choose from.

This system of indoctrination, which upholds the values of those who control it, is even more disturbing because the valuable training we receive within it (government controlled schools, etc.) prevents us from seeing the problematic system itself. How does this happen? The answer is simple. Take for example in high school, which it is important to remember is (along with elementary school) attended by a greater percentage of the population than any other educational institution, students are not allowed or aided to develop the skill of independent thought. The skill that I now find myself struggling to attain.

For an example of this lets look at political science. How closely did the political science class you were in look at Canadian government? In the classes I attended we were taught such things as how many seats there were in the house, how many seats each province had, in short we had to learn lots of "facts" and information about the system of government in place in Canada. We learned that communism was bad, and democracy was good, simple as that. We learned that under communism people were oppressed, had no control over their country's affairs, and were forced to obey the wishes of totalitarian dictators. However we never looked at our own system on the same level. We never looked at the oppression caused by our own government, or our own powerlessness as mere citizens. Why? You tell me.

In the past year or so I have begun to experience an awakening of sorts. I am finding that everyday as I look closely at the world and society in which I live, I am discovering that the world that was presented to me in high school is not the world that I am now beginning to perceive. I am realizing that I have been taught to look at the world in such a way that makes it next to impossible to form a balanced picture of the events and institutions that affect the world in which I participate. I have been indoctrinated, led to accept the way things are done and interpreted, without question. I feel as if I had been stripped of the ability to think independently and now am realizing how important it is that I relearn this very important skill.

Now this having been said I will not be running off in hopes of escaping the tyranny of my government, or quitting university in order to escape from being indoctrinated, instead I will try to balance my "formal" education, to look at it for what it likely is, one side of the story.

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