

The Legacy of soc/anth

Part two of two

Peter Gillis, Billy Zane and
Melanie Ascot

On January 21, 1997, Jennifer Caseley wrote her expose on the problems of the department of Sociology and Anthropology. The reaction to her article was quick and very powerful.

Even before the article was published, Caseley began to receive threats and complaints by students from the Soc/Anth Society itself. Executive members of the society suggested to her that she not even write the article at all, or that she contact a lawyer, because of possible lawsuits. Caseley proceeded with her research, and soon saw its publication in the Panther Prints.

Immediately following the release of the Panther Prints, a letter-writing campaign was organized by students in the soc/anth department. In their retaliation, a Canadian University Press record of 12 letters to the editor were written in total for the following newspaper issue. Few of the letters offered new evidence in the case; rather, most charged Caseley with character defamation and libel. In fact, some even went so far as to say that she was, plain and simple, a bad journalist, that she didn't know how to do research, and that she was unjustly performing a 'witch hunt'.

"The main complaint was that it was too slanderous," explained Jennifer Caseley in an interview on the subject. "However, I had all the documents to back up what I said."

Aside from written complaints, Caseley, along with staff of the Panther Prints who were not even involved with the article, received verbal abuse from soc/anth students.

"It was close to a dozen different times that they came down to the office, threatening

and complaining," said Caseley. "They even complained in our office to the photographer at one time, who obviously had nothing to do with it. I just can't see how my article could have caused that much trouble."

While this did not cause trouble with student programs, controversy was definitely starting up in other areas of the university.

The story was even brought to the attention of Phillip Smith, Dean of Arts, by Michael Klenavic, last year's Student Union Ombudsman, months before the article even came out. The Dean had also previously received several complaints from students in Soc/Anth, so was already aware of many of the concerns expressed by Caseley.

Dean Smith first approached President Epperly to determine the best solution to resolve the complaints. The President recommended an external review of the department, one that would cover both curriculum and the accusations against several professors. In addition to this, Dr. Smith decided to start his own decanal review, launched January 21, 1997.

The mandate for the decanal review was extensive. First, it was to determine if there were departmental tensions that were having an impact on students. If tensions were found to exist, the Dean had full authority, in conjunction with the President's office, to resolve the situation. This review was a private, internal review, and was therefore not open for publication or distribution. To get around the fear many students had of voicing their concerns, students were assured that any complaint they made would be held in confidence. Comments made were only open to the Dean's personal interpretation.

Letters were sent out to

faculty, student representatives, and the executive of the Soc/Anth Society to be distributed to all students of the department. Several students and staff were interviewed, and over 45 inter-faculty memos were reviewed. However, in a recent interview with Dean Smith, he recognized that not all students came forward with their concerns.

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During his review, he found that the marks of students were not suffering due to any challenges made to professors or their ideologies and that there seemed to exist a great deal of academic freedom within the department. However, this of course does not hold true when there were students being penalized for choosing sides in the conflicts between professors (Students who supported one professor would find their marks suffering in the class of an opposing faculty member.)

Smith's decanal review was completed last semester. In a letter to faculty and staff, Dean Smith stated, "I do not find evidence that tensions between Department members are interfering with the teaching and learning carried out in Sociology and Anthropology classes. And in particular, I find that the rights of students to consult with other professors are respected."

While the Dean was conducting his decanal review, a self-study of the department was also underway. This study

was comprised of both an internal review, conducted by Dr. Nagarajan, and an external review, led by Dr. Herbert Horwich and Dr. Max Hedley.

Students were under the impression that the reviews were created to deal with student complaints and that each reviewer would be available to hear their concerns. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

Dr. Horwich arrived Thursday, March 20 and stayed for only three days. During his stay, there was one meeting, held publically in the Soc/Anth lounge, on Friday, March 21. It lasted two hours and offered very few chances for students to express their concerns. Also, students were not informed of where Dr. Horwich was staying or how to contact him. Similar events occurred with the arrival of Dr. Hedley.

In an effort to help Dr. Horwich's review, Michael Klenavic e-mailed him with details of current problems and a request for the specifics of his mandate. Horwich's reply was 'to look it up' in university manuals. Klenavic received a later message from Horwich, via Dean Smith, requesting that

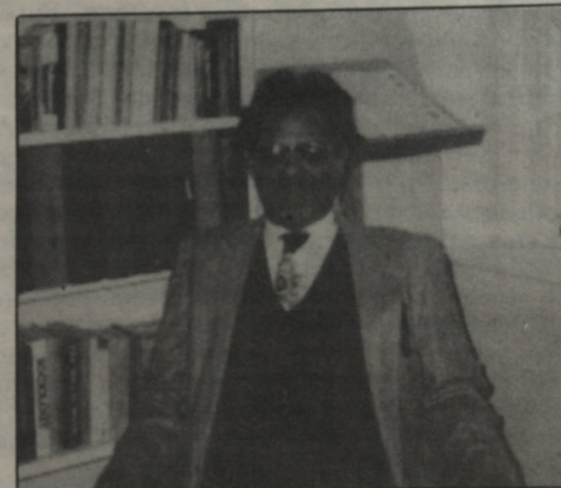
UPEI's Student Union Ombudsman refrain from sending the reviewer further information.

Klenavic also called into question the objectivity of two of the reviewers. Both Dr. Horwich and Dr. Nagarajan had strong ties to the Sociology/Anthropology Department, and to Dr. Dasgupta in particular. Dr. Horwich had been a summer session instructor at the university in the past, yet was still expected to provide an "external" perspective into the workings of the department. Dr. Nagarajan had actually allied for joint research grants with Chair Dasgupta.

In light of these ties, Klenavic encouraged the UPEI Student Council to pass a motion of protest against the reviewers. On March 2 of this year, the Council passed the following motion:

"Be it resolved that the Student Union of UPEI 1996-1997 immediately petition the Dean of Arts, Dr. Philip Smith,

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File photo of Soc/Anth Chair Dasgupta