

Vox Editorial, January 2015: Whither the Presidential Search?

This issue of VOX contains a tribute to James Brooke, professor of mathematics and statistics, and an article urging an open process for selecting our next president. On the one hand, an account of the life and intellectual interests of an esteemed and dedicated colleague; on the other, a rational plea for a presidential search that includes public presentations by shortlisted candidates.

What, you might ask, is the connection between these two points of view?

One possible link can be framed in terms of further questions: what is the function of a University? Is it to enable the advancement and dissemination of shared learning? Is this the primrose path to excellence in our work? And is this goal best served by collegial processes that apply not only to faculty but to the appointment of senior administrators? Or does secrecy in selecting a president better serve the cause of excellence? Not total secrecy perhaps, but a process that eliminates the possibility of faculty, students, and staff from attending any public lectures by those aspiring to the president's house, asking questions, and evaluating their worthiness for the job.

Which of these two alternatives would the late Professor Brooke favour, and why? In light of his established record for pedagogical and research excellence and his opposition to bureaucratic narrowness, it seems likely that he would favour an open search process. For him, secrecy does not suit a public institution whose goal is to share knowledge, not to privatize it. Bearing in mind his 30 years of service at the University of Saskatchewan, we might do well to listen to his voice.

The Editors

James Alan Brooke – A Tribute

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I could start with the canonical "The Department of Mathematics and Statistics at the University of Saskatchewan notes with sorrow the death of our colleague Prof. James Brooke" but somehow this does not feel right. James Brooke was a multi-faceted man showered with talents and intellectual ability that were hard to match. He was a mathematician, a mathematical physicist, an airplane pilot, a double-bass player, a skillful mechanic, a wine cognoscente, a university teacher, and much more. It is hard to capture in a brief summary his complicated, multi-dimensional personality, and even harder in the five-minute tribute I gave at University Council in December of last year upon which this testimonial is based.

Let me then commence by saying a few words about his childhood, early adulthood, and his education. He was born in Toronto in 1950. Toronto was a very different and much smaller city back then. Leopold Infeld, a close collaborator of Albert Einstein, and at that time a professor of Mathematics at the University of Toronto, considered Toronto a sleepy town where, in his words, "it was good to die because the transition from life to death was nearly continuous". Yet, U of T was to play a big role in James' education and academic career and so was the legacy of Prof. Infeld, probably the first internationally recognized mathematical physicist based in Canada. James earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Mathematics from U of T (Trinity College), then obtained in 1980 his PhD in Mathematics at the University of Alberta, only to return to U of T as a post-doctoral fellow with the world-renowned expert on the foundations of Quantum Mechanics, Eduardo Prugovecki, with whom he wrote several papers on this subject. In 1984, James began his professorship at the U of S in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics.

Undergraduate Students

James was an extraordinary individual for many reasons. His love of quality education was legendary among his colleagues. In the early 1990s James, on his own initiative, gathered a group of enthusiasts from two departments – Physics and Engineering Physics and Mathematics and Statistics – to initiate a new Honours Program in Mathematical Physics. This was, by design, a quality program for highly motivated students. He has been the Chair of this interdisciplinary program since its inception and only last summer did he step down when he realized that he would

not be able to carry out the advisory function of the Chair during his long-awaited sabbatical year 2014/2015. He viewed his meetings with students as the most important function of the Chair and over the years he put an immense effort into advising students, in particular helping them choose the next steps in their academic training.

Another initiative that James supported and dedicated a lot of effort to was the International Contest in Modelling. During one weekend in February, every year, a team, sometimes more than one, would work on modelling of practical problems. James inspired students to participate and he also ran preparatory meetings. When in 2005 one of the teams was awarded for its outstanding performance James was deservedly jubilant. To be recognized as one of the top nine teams among 664 participating teams worldwide was an unmitigated triumph; after all how many times do we see U of S in the company of Harvard, Duke, Berkeley and a few other institutions of great repute? This beats all the phony metrics used by administrators, not to mention that it gives the students a true sense of accomplishment which they carry with them for the rest of their lives.

Mendacity

James could show great tenderness and compassion, yet he had also the calling of a true fighter. Nothing would activate more his combative *alter ego* than mendacity. He fought mendacity in the classroom, in the examination room, and last year on the floor of University Council. James spoke eloquently in support of the Findley/Brooke motion of non-confidence in the TransformUS process as a means of making academic decisions. The wisdom of this motion was to be proven in the events that transpired this past spring. Then after the revelations of

the "Silence of the Deans" James wrote a memo to the Board of Governors and the governance committee of University Council entitled "Governance crisis at the University of Saskatchewan – Breach of Council bylaws". Subsequently, Brooke/Bartley drafted a motion addressing another, related aspect of the crisis – the financial accountability – and in particular their motion requested: *essential financial information leading to an independent audit of all underpinning budget changes that resulted in irregularities that figured into the projected 44.5M deficit.* James believed till the very end that these issues were of paramount importance for the well-being of the U of S.

James was known for his quirky sense of humour. I am reminded of a conversation we had last July. James was already very much in pain although nothing was indicating the calamity that was to unfold a month later. We were discussing a book on the history of Quantum Mechanics, or more precisely, about one of its unquestionable leaders, Paul M. Dirac. We both are admirers of the subject of Quantum Mechanics, but for James QM was the bread and butter of his scientific work. The years of great fervour in the development of QM fell in the period 1920–1930. The emerging discipline, mostly driven by its novel mathematical underpinnings, was shocking to many. James was reading to me about one group of brilliant young physicists participating in a Quantum Mechanics Seminar led by a Dutch/Austrian physicist Paul Ehrenfest. Prof. Ehrenfest apparently had a parrot with impeccable taste in physics who would interrupt heated discussions with the words: "But gentlemen, this is not physics". James and I were laughing our heads off imagining that bringing such a talented parrot to the U of S would mark a decidedly positive turn in the history of the institution, especially on the floor of University Council, which

seems to need to be reminded that a university is much more than the source of the tuition revenue. A parrot with the sublime sensitivity to the ear-piercing, soul-awakening word *priorities* would undoubtedly make some Council debates invigorating.

James had a special place in his heart for young faculty. In one of many mentoring roles he offered this advice: *I still believe that, on a personal level, we do have the option to find great satisfaction in our workday occupations here. What I mean is that we do encounter young people who are quite pure of motive, enthusiastic of purpose, and willing to take a place at the various tables of the 'sages soon-to-be-no-longer(?) on the stages' to learn what we know and are excited to convey. Those young people know what we all have known ... that once you get a person who loves his work to open up and begin to explain why he finds it so compelling then you'll have trouble shutting him up!* No wonder then they felt special reverence for him. In the words of Walid Abou Salem, one of our faculty in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics who joined us in 2010: *One inherent quality is decidedly distinct: James passionately pursued his dreams with marvelous and unyielding perseverance. Any labour he did was that of love, be it searching for truthful answers, lecturing, mentoring of students, fighting for academic freedom, or flying airplanes, and that is why it was almost always exceptional. He was not a saint. None of us is. However, he often overcame doubts, fears, illness and human frailty and courageously pursued his dreams with vigour and ever renewed energy. Any past disappointments did not make him relinquish aiming for perfection in his endeavours. This is why he lived life to the fullest. His irrepressible*

optimism and resilient human spirit will always be a beacon of hope for a lot of people who knew him.

A Farewell to a Warrior

James was very proud of the Canadian contribution to the war effort during WWII. He was well versed in the training routines of the Royal Canadian Air force and the movements of Canadian infantry. In the dark days of the

Second World War the Canadian and Polish forces fought, side by side, many battles, perhaps the single most dramatic being the Battle of Monte Cassino in 1944. With no pretense for a serious comparison, many decades later, a Canadian and a Pole, fought many battles in the university environment, side by side. Yes, we lost most of them. What remained, however, washed away the bitterness of the defeats. What remained was a pro-

found kinship forever imprinted in my heart.

On behalf of the Department of Mathematics and Statistics, and indeed, on behalf of the whole university community I would like to express our deepest felt condolences to his extraordinary family: to his wife Carolyn and his sons Charles and William.

Goodbye James, my dear friend and my brother in arms.

The presidential search: Is it possible to think outside the corporate box?

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As the University of Saskatchewan is starting the search for its new President, a discussion on the very nature of the search process is timely and healthy. Professors Allison Muri and Dwight Newman provided interesting (and in part contrasting views) on the issue of transparency. My objective here is rather different. Statements like “thinking outside the box” or “question authority” are (should I say were?) often heard in academic circles. This is what we supposedly do in our daily activities at the University both in the classroom and in our research work. As academics, we have to be critical, avoiding taking things for granted. However, I would argue that, regarding administrative issues, at the University of Saskatchewan we academics live within a closely demarcated corporate box.

It is imperative to ask ourselves, is the present system working in favour of the central mission of the University? Or, on the contrary, is the way authorities are elected a living proof of an institution that has lost its sense of direction? Judging from the recent

recurrent failures, the answer is quite clear. The system is serving a group of people (administrators, managers, lawyers, consultants, advisors) who are profiting from a decision-making process that is taking place in almost absolute secrecy at the expense of an institution which deserves otherwise. Because of its inherent lack of transparency, the current system is conducive to countless abuses and is sucking resources that should be redirected towards teaching, research and outreach. The questions are endless. Is it too much to ask candidates for a presidential position to give a talk open to the public followed by a question and answer session? Of course, this would imply that candidates make their name public. Maybe we really do not need those who are not willing to do so. Do we really need to hire a consulting firm to help the University in its search of a new President? How much does this practice cost? Is the company that we hired last time going to pay us back after the sad events of last year? In the same vein, on top of already bloated salaries, do we need to pay an extra year of salary to presidents after they have finished

their mandate? Interestingly, when administrators are asked to justify these decisions, the first answer we get is “Everybody is doing the same”, providing hints to the true meaning of concepts such as “Best practices” or “Vision”. Perhaps it is time to get rid of these costly practices and put those funds to better use.

The establishment of an upper administration totally disconnected from the daily realities of academic life has reached in some universities epic proportions. The president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, a private university in Troy, New York, has an annual salary of \$7 million. In case someone thinks this is not enough to have a decent living standard in Troy, I would like to add that she also gets another million from serving on a number of corporate boards, including those of IBM and Marathon Oil (<http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/12/15/the-7-million-university-president/>). Adjuncts at the same institution are not that lucky – they are paid \$4000 per course. Obviously that institution has other priorities.

In her excellent book “Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University”, Gaye Tuchman dissects the common practices that, sadly, pervade academic institutions these days. An interview conducted while she was researching her book candidly illustrates how senior administrators tend to advance their own careers instead of serving their university. “I hear this is a good university to move from. People have left here for really good places”, explained a senior administrator when asked for the reason for accepting the job at a particular American university. Universities have simply become stepping stones to promote the career of professional administrators. Where is the loyalty, the commitment, the pride?

For administrators jumping from one university to another, it is important to provide the community with some reassurances that they really care about their present place and that they are totally immersed in the institution. As a result, itinerant presidents and senior administrators often display significant doses of overacting.

Right before an important game, a recently parachuted president may confess his or her love for the Huskies with formidable passion. Situations like this remind me of, let’s say, a soccer player who after scoring a goal in his first game for the Istanbul team Galatasaray runs towards its supporters proudly kissing his jersey despite the fact that a few weeks ago he had no idea about how to locate Turkey on a map.

Certainly, the way university authorities are appointed in North America is profoundly anti-democratic and entirely top-down. Is this the only alternative? Certainly not! And we only need to venture outside of our predetermined box to explore other systems and compare. Many countries in Europe (e.g. Germany, France, Spain) and South America (e.g. Argentina, Brazil) have a bottom-top approach, with administrators being elected by the university community as a whole. The details are different in each of these cases, but the underlying philosophy is the same: University administrators are democratically elected. Faculty,

graduate and undergraduate students and, in some universities, staff, have representation and the right to vote for positions, such as Department Head, Dean and President. In some cases, the vote is direct whereas in others this is done indirectly by voting candidates to a council, who in turn votes for these positions. Is this a perfect system that warrants the election of the best person for the job? Definitely not, but it is up to the university community to get involved and come up with the right candidates. After all, this is not different to how we elect our representatives in the provincial or federal political arena. In a democratic system the notion of transparency takes on a completely new meaning. In my view, the conclusion is hard to avoid. The present system is not serving the central mission of the University and has jeopardized the very same essence of this institution. The institution of the University as a whole has been hijacked by a corporate or corporate-minded elite. Are we going to dare thinking outside the corporate box?

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