

Another View of the War of the Sexes

by Howard Buchbinder

Prof. Ramsay Cook aligns himself with Jonathan Swift as he contemplates the issue of employment equity for female academics ("A peace proposal for the war of the sexes" in the last issue of the *CHA Bulletin*). Cook, with support from Swift, wants us to know that "its foolish to remove one injustice by committing another". Cook's argument is that employment equity or affirmative action programmes for women academics discriminate against young men academics who will be forced to forgo positions that will be awarded to women as a means of redressing past inequities. The result will be "young women competing with young men to replace the old men basking in the peace of tenured self-satisfaction". Since it is, according to Cook, the old men who have created the problem it is they who should serve as the fodder for its resolution. The means to this end will be to change academic tenure into a conditional state which is reviewed periodically. (Perhaps every 10 years.) The substance of Prof. Cook's argument rests on the notion that tenure provides a sinecure for mediocrity. A periodic review will weed out the dead wood and provide places which can be given to women without depriving young, male academics of the chance for academic careers. Although Prof. Cook's concern with justice is admirable his arguments do not do adequate justice to a very complex situation.

Discrimination against women in Canadian universities has remained fairly constant until the last couple of years. Women academics have numbered some 15% of the overall academic complement in Canadian universities. The recent shift upward in these figures is the result of employment equity programmes which, in turn, are the result of pressure from women. It is reasonable to conclude that it would have continued to remain constant without pressure from feminists and the resulting affirmative action programmes. In my view, Cook's formulation of the division between old men and young men - old men discriminated against women and young men won't - is not borne out. It is not the men who happened to be on the faculty at any given time who have created this situation. It is all men, through the agency of institutions which have followed patriarchal policies. Remedial programmes must also be institutional. At our

University (Cook's and mine) the affirmative action programme is one that was negotiated by the York University Faculty Association and the York University administration. It recognizes that without the introduction of such a programme discrimination against women would have continued regardless of which men were present on the faculty. All men are responsible. It is not tenure that did it and it is not tenure that can resolve it.

Cook's argument for turning to the tenure system implies that it is the only method for freeing up enough academic positions to provide places for both women and young men. It should be pointed out to readers interested in this issue that such is not the case. Since the early 1970's York University, along with many other Canadian universities has hired very few full-time, tenure stream academics. Instead the young men and women academics that Prof. Cook is concerned about were hired mostly as part-time instructors. They comprised a transient academic work force with no access to full time appointments. At York University some 40% of the teaching is carried out by these part-time

employees. The university could have, at any time, created enough full-time positions to redress these discriminatory practices. However financial exigencies and desires for managerial flexibility dictated otherwise.

Finally, a few words about the institution of tenure. There has been growing pressure in the last few years to reconsider present tenure arrangements. The argument usually projects an image of mediocre individuals exploiting their good fortune as they take advantage of their tenured status. In fact these arguments develop along with the pressure to make the university a market-driven institution that will focus on serving the needs of industry. It is also used as a response to underfunding but it is couched in terms of 'creating excellence'. The institution of tenure not only secures academic freedom and expression, it is also a defence against the market. There are those who would debate against its continuation along present lines. This debate cannot be resolved by attempting to alter tenure in order to correct other problems.



Letters to the Editors

I welcomed the publication of Ramsay Cook's "Modest Proposal", a healthy injection of politics into the newsletter. The proposal itself - to create more employment opportunities for junior members of the academy by increasing the rate of turn-over among more senior members - is at best a lesser-of-two evils argument. Professor Cook, however, strikes a different and more moralizing tone, condemning the alleged corruption of the tenure system in the second part of his essay, and citing Russell Jacoby as his authority. Would the institution of multiple career reviews of tenure bring back the public intellectual? Or would it simply drive us further down the road that Jacoby laments: narrow specializations? Inattention to unrewarded work with the one public, we might add, that the professoriate still commands - namely students - would also surely follow. Among other half-measures to combat unemployment, a tougher position in favour of mandatory retirement, and in support of preference for Canadian applicants, seem infinitely more desirable.

The premise of Cook's argument is neither completely wrong nor completely right; there has been so little serious discussion of the issues of affirmative action and reverse discrimination some confusion is inevitable. Affirmative action has become a dominant credo among Canadian reformers inspired (for reasons that are far from clear) by the example of American reformers. As night follows day, rancour and conflict have followed. Ironically, there is little or no evidence that affirmative action is the explanation for the remarkable gains that women have made in the academic workplace; available statistics can be used to prove an opposite conclusion. It is a

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National Archives

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great pity that, because of ideologies and policies that confuse equality with statistical parity, the achievements of individual women should be diminished by charges and suspicions of reverse discrimination. It would be a greater irony still if women's collective achievements in the academy were to be vitiated by the introduction of ill-considered reforms whose effect will be to downgrade employment standards as a whole.

Allen Seager
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Ramsay Cook's lucid attack on the tenure system (*Bulletin*, Fall 1990) glosses over the major problem raised by such proposals: who decides merit or competence? according to what criteria? It seems to postulate the existence of a consensus on such issues which does not exist in many academic communities. Indeed, in my experience, this consensus of wise judges is believed in by many academics by a circular process of exclusion: those who challenge the possibility of fair judgment have proved themselves incompetent, while those who accept it may be considered competent and fair-minded.

It might be argued that the same problem applies at every level of scholarly appraisal. And so it does; very likely, a lot of bright and creative people are being lost now because their work or personal style or political opinions are offensive to those sitting in judgment. The present system, however, at least allows tenured scholars to write and speak with a degree of security from disapproving colleagues. Under Professor Cook's plan, there would be no such security. The situation would be especially acute in the Departments of History, where so many senior (and perhaps junior) scholars still affirm the founding myth of objectivity, in which there is One Best Account of an Objective Past, and therefore interpretive disagreements must be due to laziness or bias rather than fundamental value conflicts.

In short, the likely result of Professor Cook's modest proposal would be acres of acrimony, possibly followed by even greater homogeneity of opinion and scholarly style than exists now. Some scholars would probably welcome this result, as long as their own opinions dominated. But it would be a tragic diminution for students who must face an ever-more dynamic and various world in the next century.

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Re: Ramsay Cook's modest proposal to remove some of the inequities created by affirmative action programmes: if universities are going to hire and fire on the basis of quality, not only would they hire unemployed or partially employed male Ph.D.s and let go tenured loafers, but they would also have to allow quality sixty-five-year-old professors to continue teaching. If this blissful state of affairs came about, even affirmative action for women could be discarded, with few regrets, I suspect.

However, does Ramsay Cook really think that his idea of tenure review stands any better chance than the proverbial snowball in hell? I recall that in 1980 Dr. Cook made a cross-Canada study of history graduate programmes, and discovered that some were good and others, appallingly weak. The study was never published, and it was left for the student to discover by experience what Dr. Cook should have told us.

I suspect that his modest proposal will remain nothing more than cocktail conversation.

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