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McGill University

Canadian University Boards Association

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INTRODUCTION

First of all, I would like to acknowledge all the leaders from the academic world who have come here today to discuss the situation of universities in Canada. McGill is a highly appropriate site for these discussions, as a mecca for intellectual life in Quebec and all of Canada with a sterling international reputation. Quebecers take special pride in this great institution, which has made the pursuit of excellence its *raison d'être*.

What I have been asked to speak about, of course, is the state of the university in Quebec and Canada, the position universities occupy or should occupy in today's society, and the role they play in paving the way for tomorrow.

Let me start by saying that I do not feel I am really the most qualified person to talk about this. With your indulgence, I will try to compensate for my lack of knowledge by telling you how much interest I've always taken in education. In fact, I always hoped to serve as minister of education... another disappointment in my political career, alas.

I come by my interest in education naturally. Both my father and my mother, like so many others from families of modest means, did not themselves have access to higher education (or almost to any education). They wanted their children to get as much schooling as they could. Alas, my parents were less successful with me than with my three brothers, all of whom earned PhDs.

Indeed, what we call the Quiet Revolution in Quebec came about through the determination of countless hard-working families willing to make sacrifices to allow their children to receive a good education and fully develop their talents. And that is how the number of students at Quebec universities rose from 38,000 in 1960 to 200,000 in 2012.

It may seem like stating the obvious that Canada must continue to support and develop a network of universities that are of high quality, accessible, and properly funded. However, we must remember that for a long time now, the university has had to justify its twofold role in terms of teaching and research.

The sceptics haven't always expressed that opposition in vehement terms. Sometimes the tone of the conversation has been more like banter, as in this exchange between Sir William Gladstone and the great scientist Michael Faraday: "Tell me, Mr. Faraday, what use is this strange fluid you call electricity?" The scientist replied, "Why, sir, there is every probability that you will soon be able to tax it!" I checked this, and it may be apocryphal since Gladstone was not PM until after Faraday's death, although the conversation might have taken place while Gladstone was Chancellor of the Exchequer. Anyway, it is too illustrative a story not to be told.

THE RESILIENCE OF THE UNIVERSITY'S MISSION

Although the vital role of the university should be a *fait accompli*, no institutions can be assured of survival.

The threats now weighing upon the university come in different forms from those of times gone by. To avoid collapse, the university must arm itself in advance against the debilitating effects of chronic underfunding. That deficiency is all the more disquieting when we think how much its needs have grown: both the numbers of students and the costs of sophisticated and indispensable infrastructure have exploded.

No one knows better than you do just how much the institution has changed, in fact.

The concept of the university first sprang up in the 11th and 12th centuries in cities like Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Coindre. Students and professors formed communities to compile and circulate the knowledge of the times. I would think that the question of their autonomy arose very soon, given the desire for control by the religious authorities who gave the universities their initial impetus. It was no accident that theology was the first course to be given at the Sorbonne. Royalty's attempts at domination came soon, countering the first movements to affirm what we call university autonomy today. The

development of that autonomy, as well as that of the mission of the university, was a lengthy, tumultuous and eventful process. The French Revolution, for example, prohibited universities and condemned them to closure. Such clashes punctuated the many transformations of this great adventure of the human spirit. The result of these metamorphoses reveals the fundamental characteristics of the university, which have remained consistent: first, the resilience that testifies to its inherent necessity; and second, the flexibility that has enabled it to adapt its mission to the needs of an ever-evolving society.

The mere fact of having survived all these obstacles and bumps along the way shows the extent to which the university has always served as the prime vehicle in the quest for knowledge – a quest with which all human endeavours are identified. Academic institutions were thus destined to support for that most noble of human attributes – reason. Right from the start, they established their legitimacy through their commitment to human dignity, free will, a sense of justice and the desire to create a community that respected the rights of all. As a result, the mission of the university was essentially founded in its humanistic

vocation. In the classrooms, laboratories and studies of professors and scientists, the modes of thinking and the values of citizens are fashioned patiently, day after day.

However much we discuss the details of standards, funding formulas, and modalities for research supervision, when it comes to overarching principles, nothing can dilute the irreplaceable nature of the university's role. That recognition, that duty to respect and provide privileged support for the university, must therefore inspire any policy set by government.

And so those institutions have found themselves playing the double role of mirror and catalyst in the evolution of society. They have survived at each stage in their development by adapting their contribution to societal expectations. What the university does and what it teaches have determined the advances and progress made by the community as a whole. Society and the university cannot be disentwined, as they are inevitably bound together by a social contract.

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Since the State is the representation and the most highly perfected engine of collective action, it has entered with the university into a social contract. It is hardly possible to confine its terms to a precise framework, given the complexity and ever-moving nature of that partnership. The State most often endows the university with the legal protection to guarantee its existence and define its statutes. King's College in Halifax, Toronto, Laval and McGill were even created before the Confederation by royal Charters. Right away, we can see inklings of the paradox that underlies this complicated relationship, for the State, in addition to giving the university the legislative framework, also recognizes its obligation to provide the financial resources for its needs. Here we can see the delicacy of this relationship: the university must protect its freedom from attempts at control by the State, which pays most of the bills. It is not surprising that government administrators sometimes show impatience when universities resist what they view as undue intrusions in their activities. We will never see the end of this debate, which in any case cannot be resolved by simplistic solutions. The very term of this social contract makes it necessary

to weigh, in a manner that must be conjectural, all the dimensions of public order and all the issues raised in the management of this partnership. Because universities receive public funds, naturally citizens expect that universities be held accountable.

At this point a balance needs to be struck between, on the one hand, the requirements of university autonomy and on the other, the degree of constraint upon that autonomy that the imperatives of accountability can reasonably impose.

These exercises undoubtedly require some acrobatics, but they are a daily reality in the relationship between the two partners.

The most crucial point is this: both government and universities must recognize the fundamental requirement of academic freedom and agree to balance a reasonable level of accountability against it, in tandem with the Government's fundamental obligation to provide financial support for the university mission.

Of course, university administrators have to seek balances in other areas, not only in relation to the interface between the university as an autonomous body and the government as funder. They must also juggle other, seemingly contradictory requirements, such as harmonizing the requirements for accessibility and quality, a highly problematic step.

We can only congratulate ourselves on the influx of students to whom the doors of the university have opened wide in the twentieth century. In the wake of industrialization and urbanization, profound social movements have changed the status of universities from elite to more democratic institutions. After the Second World War, all levels of society were permeated by the importance of ideas, research, and the sharing of knowledge in the collective development of society. In Quebec, accessibility to higher education became the main thrust of the efforts deployed to build a modern society in the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. From that arose the challenge that all universities face, constrained as they are to juggle increased enrolment with the pursuit of their objectives – quality and excellence. As a consequence, academic standards

cannot be maintained without the assistance of increased government resources.

These pressures exerted on both partners in the social contract have inevitably taken on a political dimension, as the Government has had to make difficult decisions regarding taxation and allocation of budget resources.

It seems to me that we must recognize that governments, overall, have not shrugged off their responsibilities towards universities, although one might think that they could have done so to a greater extent. But let's remember that their budget resources are limited and that distributing resources from one sector to another puts governments under enormous stress when they have to choose, for example, between more money for health care or more money for education.

The university also has some difficult choices to make.

Should research be given priority over teaching? Theoretical research or targeted research? Is it acceptable for the university to make money by

marketing products based on research conducted in its laboratories? Or should the public domain be the beneficiary? To what point should the university welcome private research funding, and under what conditions?

First of all, private research funding is there to stay. If it raises questions, it is not about the principle of its existence but about its modalities. Research funding cannot rely, as extensively as operating expenses, on Government allocation. No financial sources can be excluded, provided they are subjected to proper ethical rules. The same applies for money drawn from marketing products developed by university research. Those benefits are acceptable within technological transfers and after submission to peer assessments.

THE PROBLEM OF FUNDING

The most critical question is government funding. Overall, the Canadian average is 53%, while it stands at 65% in Quebec, where it ranges from 46% at McGill University, to 74% in the UQ network, 72% at Laval, and 70% at UDM.

When we look at those contributions, there are two essential issues: first, the level and distribution of funding, and second, the degree of control governments would like to exert over university.

When it comes to funding, the big question is ensuring the level of quality so that our universities are positioned favourably within the North American and European networks. This is doubtless the most difficult aspect to highlight in a public discussion, where the concepts of quality and excellence stand little chance of emerging in a sea of technical and financial references – not to mention the fact that adjacent needs like health care and social programs attract much more public attention. As we know, the achievements and failures of the universities are evaluated over a much longer term.

Our universities, especially in Quebec, face threats that are no less dangerous because they are so insidious. The danger is that their performance will gradually slip, suffering from a chronic lack of funding.

The precarious nature of public finances necessitates budget adjustments of which the voters take a very dim view. And so public demand for quality education services does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with acceptance of higher taxes. By the end of the efforts made during the Quiet Revolution, Quebec governments had run out of steam, with the highest debt of the larger provinces in Canada and the heaviest tax burden.

We can see the wall the Government of Quebec came up against in 2012, when it attempted to raise students' contribution to supporting their universities.

That context alone illustrates the difficulty of convincing governments to raise their contributions.

The push for accountability will not disappear any time soon. With public opinion closely scrutinizing nearly all government expenditures and demanding more and more transparency in the administration of public funds, academic institutions will not be surprised to face questions - questions made even more acute by universities' level of autonomy.

INTERVENTION IN THE CITY BY THE UNIVERSITY

Of course, while the situation does not lend itself to optimism, I sincerely believe that the universities are not without means of redressing the situation.

Whether it is a matter of underfunding or of perceived attacks on their autonomy, the universities' response must be inspired by the very nature of their mission and appeals to all parties to respect the social contract. As a last resort, they will find that the interest and good sense shown by the population makes the public its most powerful and legitimate ally.

For this to happen, elected officials and university administrators must be much more present in the public sphere. It is up to them to initiate an open dialogue with partners from a range of backgrounds. I do not mean to imply here that university administrators are holed up in their offices, cut off from the public. It seems to me that given the current ascendancy of public communications over a real understanding of the issues, it is in the interest of university administrators to appear more frequently at forums and to intensify their participation in public exchanges. Academic leaders are clearly in the

best and most credible position to boost public awareness of current problems in their institutions.

They could also create more opportunities to: 1) remind people of the vital role of the University mission and the necessity of the financial support it requires; and 2) affirm the University's willingness to behave like a responsible and transparent partner in implementing the social contract that connects it to the community at large.

We know that understanding the specific role of the University is a determining factor in getting the general public to support increased government funding. In my opinion, a great deal remains to be done in this area. It is well known that universities are at the top of the training path, where access to the best paid jobs opens up. For many people, that is where their knowledge of the University ends. Besides, the lack of funding for the universities is far from obvious to the public, especially when government representatives produce already substantial figures for allocations. For Quebec

alone, we're talking about a global amount of \$2.6 billion, and for the other provinces in Canada, \$11.1 billion.

The public is also subject to the dictatorship of the short term, being much more aware of such immediate needs as health care, job creation, road infrastructure, and so on. From this perspective, the development of universities runs the risk of falling well down the list of general concerns.

What's more, the complexity of funding programs makes it singularly difficult to understand or even really hear the universities' complaints. The mere mention of the word "underfunding" automatically makes opponents and commentators spew out avalanches of numbers that quickly blur the message and make the general public weary of the whole subject. Caught in the crossfire of contradictory statistics, the public and even the media are tempted to leave the protagonists to their own devices and take comfort from the idea that there is no real emergency.

Although these problems are very real, they should not deter representatives of the academic world from carrying out an increasingly imperative duty to

provide information and pedagogy. Few institutions have such access to public forums. Leaders should not hesitate to use these resources and methods to influence public opinion as to the crucial nature of what the university does, and to remind them that since time immemorial, the university has been an essential moving force in the progress of humanity and civilization.

As I raise the issue of making such an effort in terms of public education, please believe that I don't mean to suggest – far be it from me, in fact – any kind of aggressive campaign directed at our governments. Nothing could be more counter-productive and contrary to the spirit of partnership that brings you together. What I have in mind is more of an approach designed to mobilize public opinion. In reality, more than one premier and more than one minister of education, knowing the university's vital importance, would be interested in relying on public opinion to highlight the benefits of increased support for the university mission. It becomes much easier for a government to promote a cause if it is favoured by the public. After all, most of our elected officials and government officials come from your institutions and benefitted

from them, and so they are the fruit of your teaching on civil society and are aware of your essential needs. You can hope that they, as much as other citizens, will really pay attention to your persuasive efforts.

No one is in a better position than your organization to speak for the University. In addition to all of you, as officials and managers, your formidable cohort of professors, thinkers, and researchers can make strong presentations in public debates. It is hard to see how their academic freedom could suffer from raising public awareness of the role and needs of their universities. It seems to me that defending and illustrating their institution's mission dovetails perfectly with their professional commitment. In any event, they can remind everyone of university champions such as Erasmus and Pico della Mirandola who did not fear to embody the very best of humanity against all that was powerful, when faced with ignorance, intolerance and denial of human rights. The world should know that the spectacular successes of modern technology began their development within the walls of the university. The principles that fashioned modern government were also born in that setting.

THE VITAL ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

What is happening today, in a world so cruelly marked by violence and religious extremism, shows that it was a mistake to announce the end of History. Unfortunately, the evils of the past are not the only ones to survive. Our contemporary crop of evils brings new ones – hence the continuation and even the enhancement of the necessary role of the university. More than ever, we must be able to count on the university's vigilance in countering the dangers of dehumanization presented by standardization and globalization, among other things.

What would become of creativity, the critical sense, free will, and cultural diversity in a world dominated by single-minded thinking and materialistic interests? In this regard, the mission of the University is more timely than ever, serving as a solid anchor to halt the downfall of civilization, and promoting another Renaissance . Acting as the conscience of society is one of the primary responsibilities entrusted to the university.

Another factor in garnering public support is the contribution universities make to economic development, which has become irreplaceable in today's society. That awareness is a very convincing way to mobilize citizens to increase government support. The scope of the economic contribution of universities across Canada and in Quebec goes much farther than the general public realizes. Few people have a true perception of the spinoffs of their activities in terms of added value and quality employment. Few businesses generate such impacts, especially if, on top of operating expenses and assets, we take into account all the research conducted at your institutions.

Since we are hosted by McGill University, I'd like to share a few facts from a SECOR study conducted for this institution. Every year, McGill contributes more than \$5 billion to the Quebec economy. Though spinoffs of that magnitude are not always evaluated by the same methods, a Conference Board study concluded that the economic impacts of post-secondary education in Canada add up to \$55 billion.

At no other time in history have societies derived such great benefits from the creation of knowledge and the achievements of university research centres, notably in the field of technology. In this knowledge-based economy, research has become so important that it is impossible to quantify all of its benefits. Who can really evaluate the results that are likely to flow over a very long period of time in all the directions where research takes us? This is another reason why there is no better investment for a government than resources allocated to university funding. Nothing is more profitable, in the short and medium terms, than training citizens so that they have the knowledge and skills to create our collective prosperity.

Many other benefits of university activities in the communities they serve spill over the margins of reports crammed with numbers. Besides opening windows on every sphere of international life, the activities of your institutions exert a structural impact in domains as diverse as culture, health care, social inclusion, and sports.

THE COMPETITION FOR QUALITY

It would be a fatal error to consider in isolation the level of universities' needs and funding. Without any thought of automatically aligning the budgets of our universities with those of the most prestigious American and European institutions, we cannot depart from their standards with impunity. Funding and performance are now inexorably subject to international comparison. A UNESCO study concluded that national criteria are no longer sufficient for conceiving the mission of the university. Global interests, such as the sustainable development of emerging economies or the mobility of top talent, are now part of their universe.

The quality and recognition of degrees flow from the prestige and ratings of the institutions that grant them. Ratings mean rankings – and hence the inevitable competition with other members of university networks. When we evaluate funding, we cannot ignore the relative rankings of our universities within those networks that extend far beyond our borders. We know that the great universities that comprise these networks have much more substantial resources than we do. The financial discrepancy will end up translating in

performance levels, which makes us fear for the relative rankings of our universities within these groups. Other countries must share that fear, as China and Brazil, for example, are currently making massive investments in their universities. France recently announced a one-time injection of 6.3 billion Euros in the budgets for its eight top-performing institutions.

In this regard, there are grounds for concern regarding the fate of our so-called research universities, which play a very specific role within the whole network, where are juxtaposed complementary missions, regardless of hierarchy.

Our research universities are more vulnerable than others to comparisons with their foreign competitors, which generally enjoy far superior financial means.

As professors Robert Lacroix and Louis Maheux have pointed out, their international positioning is already jeopardized by their relatively low number of research doctorate students, one-third fewer than in the United States, not to mention the percentage of students graduating from undergraduate programs, which is in the bottom half of the 30 countries in the OECD. We still have a

long way to go to demonstrate in an effective manner the vital role of universities and the collective necessity to provide them with solid support.

GOVERNANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND AUTONOMY

But the relationship with the public goes both ways. Recent debates in Quebec have highlighted another requirement: to reassure the public – and the Government – regarding the sound governance and transparent administration of our universities. This is the university counterpart of the social contract with society. Once again, we touch on the freedoms the University must enjoy in order to carry out its traditional tasks and on the very nature of its role.

I move forward over this minefield with considerable caution. Your predecessors have always jealously protected their autonomy. We can only congratulate them on their reliance on the supremacy of reason and the independence of science. When academic freedom is the issue, certainly no compromise is possible. Without a doubt, you must quell any attempt to influence academic ideas, course content, or the direction of a particular line of thinking. The same holds true for theoretical research, which must remain the

foundation of university research. However, I can see that there are nuances in applied research. Is it acceptable for private grants to come with an obligatory designation of research topics? I imagine that question is asked, in more traditional terms, in the pharmaceutical field. Clearly, a genuine pragmatism must apply here so that we can define a balanced *modus vivendi*. We will only get there by finding measured answers to questions such as these: is it possible, within a regime that includes applied research, to acknowledge right up front that theoretical research must remain the basis of university research? What guarantees need to be put in place to protect, if need be, the individuality of researchers within a research group?

The thorniest question is deciding how to harmonize the principle of autonomy with the obligation for accountability.

Allow me to suggest making a distinction between academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Academic freedom is an absolute principle on which there can be no compromise. On the other hand, it seems to me that the other attribute cannot claim equally strict protection. If it is essential for university

administrations to have complete freedom in making all decisions of an academic nature, the situation is not the same when it comes to administrative management of public funds. In an era when government departments are expected to publish monthly statements of operating expenses on the Web, the public generally expects detailed accounts to be rendered for sums that come from governmental sources. A line must then be drawn to mark the limits of accountability requirements. The dangers of excessive control remain very present. Consequently, vigilance will always be required in this fluid area where we try to strike a balance between autonomy and accountability.

A significant example of such an attempt can be found in the proposed Charter of Values (Bill 60). A law enacted along the lines of this Bill would have imposed on university teachers and students the prohibition of wearing conspicuous religious symbols. Apart from its most objectionable general provisions, the Bill flagrantly breached the institutional autonomy of universities. They were treated as agents of the State and submitted to instructions that would have directly infringed upon the rights of professors

and students and, in so doing, run contrary to the universities' mission and values.

The best way to prevent and deflect unacceptable control attempts by governments is to rally public support of universities' independence. It calls for a definition of clear and rigorous signposts, meeting the highest expectations of the public. There are hardly any other ways than a sound governance policy to consolidate public confidence in the university.

You have already set high standards in this regard, but that fact is not generally well known. The evolution of communications has raised public scrutiny a notch. The rise of social media has moved popular judgment away from assessments based on facts and objective criteria, and into a world of perceptions.

The credibility of elected officials and administrators has suffered greatly from a perception of opacity and sometimes even laxness. The definition and strict application of rules for transparency are surely the safest ways of conferring healthy protection against such false impressions.

It is all too easy for social media or mean-spirited critics to turn the fair claims made by universities upside down, in occasional polemics, for example, around the remuneration paid to a rector or the amount of severance pay to someone who leaves a university position. Strict references to previously defined administrative standards appear to me the most efficient protection against such traps.

The days are gone when it was sufficient for ministers of the crown to give their word of honour to justify their operating expenses. Nothing could be more random than relying on areas of subjective interpretation. From this perspective, the universities need to comply with the highest requirements, given their self-imposed mission for democratic vigilance.

The professors appear to me to be submitted to similar requirements.

While universities like McMaster, Simon-Fraser and a few others have enacted Codes of Conduct for their professors, many, such as McGill, chose a different

path. Instead of imposing Codes specifically applying to professors, they have adopted a set of policies and regulations where, among others, teachers' roles and different obligations are defined. They are thus regulating a diversity of subjects like the employment of academic staff, the hiring contract of professors and questions related to research, harassment and so forth. Without forcing everyone into the same mold, it would be appropriate for all universities to do a better job in describing the ethical measures which have been put in place. Of course, for those who did not issue any rules of the kind, it is highly advisable to do likewise.

From the moment that this addition to the governance framework is formulated, of course in full respect of the professors' academic freedoms, it would certainly be perceived by both the public and the Government as an additional pledge of confidence.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the tasks that traditionally devolve upon them, today's universities must assume an unprecedented level of responsibility as an essential player in democratic society. Professor George Follis of York University makes that point forcefully in "The mission of the University":

"Sometimes when we think of democracies, we think of the institutions of civil society, such as religious institutions, labour unions and free press, necessary to counteract concentrations of power in government and business. Now, in our post-industrial society, in our world where knowledge is the most important factor in economic and social growth, the University has become a crucial institution in civil society... in counteracting concentrations of power in government and in business."

Since all educational theory can be seen as political theory, the university becomes an entity that is intimately associated with the way democracy works. The educational approach begins with asking what type of citizens we want to

prepare for tomorrow's world. This is not the type of question that government authorities naturally ask themselves, but the university, whose *raison d'être* is to pose that very question, must come up with an answer and implement that answer through its educational tasks. This responsibility confers at the same time a power that can balance the increasingly visible influence of companies and markets. This is how the university is called upon to define the values that will be presented to the citizens of the future. At the same time, this brings us into the domain of morals and critical thinking, in reaction to any tyranny of ideas or political intrusion.

Nothing in that can simplify the relationship with the Government that pays the bills. This is the great challenge faced by Canadian universities, because the main origin of your funding will continue to be the government, for the foreseeable future.

Your power, founded on the provision of a liberal education, is not by nature a traditional balance of power. It is based on a broader recognition of a role that

emerged from the Enlightenment – the power of ideas and the steady progress of humankind.

Finally, you must rely on the capacity of our whole society to understand that its prosperity, its place in the world and its place in history, go hand in hand with the stable and enlightened support of our universities.