

# “Accountability versus Autonomy”

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## INTRODUCTION

My association with the Conference Board of Canada goes back to the 1980s, to the days of Jim Nininger and Florence Campbell and the creation of the excellence awards for collaborations between universities and business at a time when there was less of that interaction than there is now. At the time I was president of the University of New Brunswick and found myself resenting that the first award was given to that upstart institution, the University of Waterloo. But as the master of ceremonies on the award night I grinned and bore it, little thinking that in a year or two I would be president of that upstart university and thinking such awards were only its due.

I am happy to be part of this meeting of the Quality Network for Universities that uniquely brings together vice-presidents from across the university and across the country. The fact that all of you have taken two days from your institutional commitments to be here tells me that you recognize, as I do, the very high quality of the sessions the Conference Board organizes.

I am especially pleased to be here on the campus of York University. Next year York will mark its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. There is a famous publicity photo from the early 1960s, taken before the ground had been broken for the first buildings here, showing York's founding president, the late Murray Ross, sitting behind a desk in the middle of a cow pasture that would in less than half a century become an impressive city of intellect. York, as much as any university in

Canada, speaks to what has been achieved in Canadian higher education in the past half-century.

Your theme for these two days is “Accountability versus Autonomy?” Having served as president of three universities, I can sympathize with how the accountability burden weighs on each of you. Not long ago, a task force composed of staff from the Council of Ontario Universities and the Ontario government found that universities submit a minimum of 40 reports each year to the provincial government alone. For some the figure was more than 90. If we add reports that are required by the federal and local governments, one can see why university leaders feel like Pilgrim in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, wishing the burden would roll off their backs down hill and into an empty tomb.

Don’t take my word for it, but my hunch is that liberation from the accountability burden will not come anytime soon. For one thing, as times get tough governments tend to give more regulation as compensation for giving less money. Or so it seemed to those of us who lived through the restraint of the 1980s and the eruptions of the 1990s in Ontario.

But let’s not blame governments entirely. For Canadians, accountability, not hockey, is our national obsession. Northrop Frye once observed that, while Americans and Canadians both are fascinated by money, there is a difference:

Americans like to make money; Canadians like to audit it. I don’t know of any other country where the accountant enjoys a higher social and moral status.<sup>1</sup>

Another authoritative cultural critic, Robert Fulford, spoke of the same national propensity when he wrote:

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<sup>1</sup>*Globe and Mail*, April 6, 1976. Published in *Northrop Frye on Canada*, edited by Jean O’Grady and David Staines, volume 12 of *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, University of Toronto Press, 2003, 468.

Canadians love regulation. What rice is to the Japanese, what wine is to the French, regulation is to the Canadians. When any new phenomenon appears on the horizon, whether it is in vitro fertilization or superconductivity, our first response is always the same: how do we regulate this sucker? An Ottawa bureaucrat's highest word of praise for an industry is "orderly," meaning well regulated. The BNA Act promises "peace, order, and good government," but the only one we absolutely insist on is order."

Our fate, it would seem, lies not in our stars but in ourselves: we protest against government by auditor general, but would have it no other way.

Having arrived at this point in thinking about my assigned topic, I was tempted to quit, but then remembered Judith Gibson saying something about needing 40 minutes. So, to keep Judith happy, I would like to make three points.

First, and predictably, given how I have introduced the subject, I will argue that the accountability challenges universities face today are a continuation of challenges we have faced for a very long time. The nature and extent of university accountability has been contested ground between governments and universities in Canada throughout the period since the Second World War, and possibly even earlier than that.

Second, I will argue that we should not see accountability and autonomy as alternatives, such that the expansion of one necessarily leads to the contraction of the other. I will suggest instead that accountability is the price that universities must pay to maintain their autonomy. We should see the two as compatible if not connubial.

Third, and perhaps more to your liking, I want to argue that many current accountability requirements are simply not useful. Governments need to do a better job of defining what they expect of universities, and then design their accountability requirements accordingly. Doing so will probably not lighten the accountability burden, but it offers the prospect of an

accountability framework that sheds greater light on how universities contribute to the public good and why they merit the autonomy they enjoy.

I will draw on examples from Ontario. But as a Newfoundlander whose career has brought me in contact with colleagues from all ten provinces, I believe those of you from outside Ontario will hear more than a few things with which you can identify.

### A WORD FROM MY SPONSOR

But first, I interrupt this broadcast for a word from my sponsor.

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario is an independent agency funded by the Government of Ontario through the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The government established it in response to one of the Honourable Bob Rae's recommendation in his review of higher education in Ontario four years ago.

The Council itself is composed of 7 members, chaired by the Honourable and wonderful Frank Iacobucci. Our research enterprise – the heart of our matter – is brilliantly led by Dr. Ken Norrie, former VP Academic at McMaster and once a member of the QNU. The Council has been asked by the Ontario government to provide leadership in creating an accountability framework for the postsecondary education sector; to monitor and report on accessibility; to encourage inter-institutional transfer; and to advise on system planning and inter-jurisdictional competitiveness.

This means that we will make recommendations on the steps that should be taken to improve the quality and accessibility of postsecondary education. We will advise the government on targets that should be set to improve PSE, and the timeframes for achieving those targets. We will also provide the minister with recommendations on performance measures that can be used to evaluate the sector.

In sum, the Council's goal is to enhance all aspects of postsecondary education, including quality, access, and accountability. So the issue of accountability is near, if not dear, to our hearts.

Here endeth the commercial. We now return to our regular broadcast.

### **THE ACCOUNTABILITY BURDEN IS NOT NEW**

It is instructive to remember that the accountability challenge is not new. In 1966, William Davis, who was then Minister of Education and the Minister of University Affairs, came to this campus to give perhaps the most highly publicized speech of his career up to that time. He spoke as part of a distinguished lecture series on the relationship between governments and universities. Today we can scarcely remember a time when a minister of the Crown would deliver a serious and scholarly lecture. Nor can we recall a time when a lecture on this topic would receive front-page attention from the Globe and Mail and other media.

Now why would Mr. Davis choose to give a lecture on the government-university relationship? At the time he spoke the issue had been festering for two decades. At the end of the Second World War, the Ontario government, like so many others, recognized that economic development and prosperity would depend on the highly educated managers, professionals and scientists that only the universities could provide. And so universities began to attract a growing share of provincial budgets.

The challenge for government was how to ensure that universities, in return for this money, were contributing to the public good. Initially this was done through tools that, in hindsight, seem remarkably intrusive. Until the mid-1960s, the Premier of the province had a direct hand in approving each university's annual operating budget. There was no such thing as a funding formula. Each university would submit its budget to the Premier's office, showing its planned

activities and expenses for the coming year, and also its expected revenues. The university would ask the Province to provide an operating grant to fill the gap between revenue and expense. With luck, the Province would simply provide the amount requested. But if the Premier and his advisors thought the university was being overly ambitious – maybe it was planning to start too many new programs, or to start new activities that were deemed unnecessary – then the Premier’s office would simply delete those items and adjust the grant accordingly.

As you can imagine, this was scarcely a golden age of university autonomy. Ed Stewart, who was an historian of the government-university relationship as well as a senior public servant, wrote that:

It was not until the late 1940s, at the earliest... that the idea of university autonomy became widely accepted in Ontario[,] and it was not until the early 1960s that expressions of support for the concept were openly heard. Whether it could be maintained in the face of increasing government financial support was [by the mid-1960s] a major question.<sup>2</sup>

The significance of Mr. Davis’s lecture in 1966 was that it was the fullest public articulation of the government’s views about university autonomy. Mr. Davis defended academic freedom and acknowledged the desirability of maintaining a high level of university autonomy. But he also noted that the obligations of universities to the public extended far beyond simple financial accountability. It’s worth quoting a few sentences:

In so far as I can ascertain, the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the provincially assisted universities of Ontario is equivalent to, if not greater than, that known by publicly supported universities anywhere - including the United Kingdom. There is, moreover, much evidence to indicate that provided the universities can meet the responsibilities of

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<sup>2</sup> E.E. Stewart, *The role of the provincial government in the development of the universities of Ontario, 1791-1964* (Ed.D. thesis, OISE, 1970), 540.

our times we should undoubtedly be better off if they were allowed to continue to operate with such autonomy.

On the other hand, if they cannot or will not accept those responsibilities, and if, for example, large numbers of able students must be turned away because the university is not prepared to accept them, or if, as another example, some of the less glamorous disciplines are ignored, despite pressing demands for graduates in those areas, or if costly duplication of effort is evident, I cannot imagine that any society, especially one bearing large expense for higher education will want to stand idly by. For there will inevitably be a demand - there have been indications of this in other jurisdictions - that government move in and take over.

In saying this I am not attempting to act as an alarmist or to use alarmist tactics, but it is important that we realize what the possibilities are. I have already stressed that I am in favour of free and independent universities, but this belief will not take away the question as to whether our institutions of higher learning can meet the challenge. Only our universities will be able to answer that.<sup>3</sup>

Diplomatically, but unmistakably, Mr. Davis made it clear that public support for universities would hinge on the willingness of universities to recognize and meet their public responsibilities.

Why should we care about that lecture today? Because it sets out a point of view that I believe has been generally supported by every Ontario government (and indeed every provincial government) in the decades since the 1960s - though perhaps less publicly and less eloquently. Governments have goals for the university system - notably, that it should contribute to a more prosperous economy, and provide opportunities for young people to participate fully in the

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<sup>3</sup> William Mansfield Cooper, William G. Davis, Alphonse-Marie Parent, and Thomas R. McConnell. *Governments and the University: The Frank Gerstein Lectures*, York University, 1966, p. 33,

economic and social life of the province. From a government perspective, university autonomy is not an end in itself, but a means to achieving the public's goals for the universities. And so governments over the years have been quite ambivalent about university autonomy – sometimes deferring to the universities in important matters, and sometimes exercising the power of the purse to force universities to respond to public objectives. On balance, I believe that a reasonable accommodation has been reached.

### ACCOUNTABILITY AND AUTONOMY SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO GO STEADY EVEN THOUGH THEY CANNOT MARRY

The history just cited sheds light on what we actually mean when we talk about accountability and autonomy in a university context.

Most scholars in this field accept that university autonomy is different from academic freedom. Academic freedom – by which I mean, in the classic formulation, the university's freedom “ to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study”<sup>4</sup> – has been strongly defended by the universities and has been widely respected by Ontario governments since the Second World War.

But university autonomy is something different. University autonomy is generally understood to mean the freedom of the university to manage its own affairs. This concept may be further divided into procedural autonomy – the right of the university to set its internal governance processes, and substantial autonomy – the right of the university to determine its own goals and programs.<sup>5</sup>

Governments in Ontario have generally respected procedural autonomy, although they have often rushed universities into making decisions more quickly than they would otherwise have

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<sup>4</sup> Opinion of Justice Felix Frankfurter, United States Supreme Court, *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*, decided June 17, 1957. Frankfurter attributes the definition to a conference of universities in South Africa. See <http://laws.findlaw.com/us/354/234.html> .

<sup>5</sup> Robert O. Berdahl, cited in OCUA, *21<sup>st</sup> Annual Report* (1995), 320.

made them. And let's be honest, that's sometimes justified. (It's not for nothing the academic senate has been defined as a body of people who individually can do nothing, but together can decide that nothing can be done.)

Governments have been much less willing to concede full substantial autonomy, because substantial autonomy has a great likelihood of conflicting with the government's goals for the university system. On matters of substance, the government has in many areas deferred to the universities, has in some cases worked in partnership with them, and in a few cases has used its fiscal power to impose its will.

What about this inelegant, ubiquitous word "accountability"? In its simplest form, it means "answerability" – the responsibility of the university to answer the government's questions about how funds are disbursed and whether public objectives are being met. We should recognize though that if the government does not like the answers, further discussion will ensue. So we might say that accountability refers to the universities' obligation to demonstrate to the government that they are achieving results.

If you accept these definitions, you will perhaps accept my argument that autonomy and accountability are not at odds with one another. Rather, accountability is what makes autonomy possible. To borrow an expression from the public administration reformers, accountability allows governments to do some of the steering without doing any of the rowing. It provides an alternative to the world where, to use Mr. Davis's words, the government "moves in and takes over."

Harry Arthurs, the president emeritus of York, put it somewhat more felicitously. He told a group some years ago:

Autonomy and accountability are the diversionary opening bids in a Faustian negotiation. Accountability is the most innocuous concession that government can afford to ask of autonomous institutions, if it wishes to assure that public funds are

being spent in accordance with public priorities; it is also the most ingratiating gesture autonomous institutions can afford to make, if they wish to forestall state intervention.<sup>6</sup>

## WHAT WOULD A BETTER ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK LOOK LIKE?

So far I have argued that the accountability challenges we face today are not especially new, and that accountability is the necessary price of maintaining university autonomy. Sounds simple, but alas, to invoke the shade of T. S. Eliot, somewhere between conception and reality falls a shadow. The freight universities are forced to pay to meet their obligations to government often seem exorbitant. If universities accept that they have a responsibility to report to the government on whether public objectives are being achieved, they might reasonably expect a coherent statement of what these goals actually are, and a cost- and time-effective way of reporting on current levels of achievement.

Regrettably, we are not there yet.

It is not likely that T. S. Eliot had Ontario in mind when he wrote: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" but he might have. In Ontario, we have many reporting requirements. But some of them generate data without producing information. In more than a few cases universities are required to report on results without knowing what the government's goals or expectations are.

For example, universities and colleges are required to report each year on the graduation rates and employment rates for each of their programs. This exercise produces some worthwhile data. But there is no public goal or target for what these rates should be, or whether they should be the same for every university and every program.

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<sup>6</sup> H.W. Arthurs, "How do I Love Thee?: A Short Essay on University Accountability". Remarks to the Queen's University Council, May 5, 1994, p. 5. Cited in Diana M. Royce, *University System Coordination and Planning in Ontario 1945 to 1996* (Ed.D. thesis, OISE/UT, 1998), 41.

To give another example: Universities and colleges – like all public sector bodies – are required to report the name and salary of every employee who earns more than \$100,000 a year. These lists now run to dozens of pages of single-spaced names. While transparency is a virtue, it should be said that, in the view of many people in higher education, the primary effect of this disclosure has been to level up the salaries of those who appear underpaid relative to their peers.

The problem is made worse by the reluctance of government to cull established requirements, and so new requirements are sometimes layered on old ones.

Of course, universities have not themselves been blameless. In public statements they have sometimes measured educational quality by calculating funding per student, or by counting the number of students per tenured or tenure-track faculty member. I think we all know the shortcomings of these measures.

Meanwhile, we know almost nothing about important areas of activity. For example, we know little about how much students have learned during their university years, or how resources have been deployed to educate them. As institutions we have invested very little in conducting research on the heart of what we do – teaching and learning. We examine all other fields of knowledge, but we ignore teaching and learning almost completely. Derek Bok, president emeritus of Harvard University, has written that:

[M]ost professors teach in the ways they traditionally have, confident that the ways that have worked well enough in the past will continue to serve in the future. Though trained in research themselves, they continue to ignore the accumulating body of experimental work suggesting that forms of learning that engage students actively in the learning process do significantly better than conventional methods in achieving goals, such as critical thinking and problems-solving, that faculties everywhere hold dear.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Derek C. Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges : A Candid Look at how Much Students Learn and why They Should be Learning More*, Princeton University Press, 2006, 312.

So I think it is fair to say that both governments and universities could do better in accounting for how well the higher education system achieves its purposes.

To its great credit, the present Ontario government has attempted to bring some coherence to accountability by establishing multi-year agreements with each institution. The government recognizes that these agreements are a work in progress and has invited the Higher Education Quality Council to assist in making them more useful.

Our work on these issues is still underway. But let me share with you how the Council sees them at present.

In the Council's view, while the Ontario higher education system reports a great deal of data, what is missing is an accountability framework. In this context, a "framework" can be defined as a way of organizing information so that we can draw useful conclusions from it. A framework would allow us to see how the many quality-related processes now in place relate to one another.

The framework should focus on educational outputs rather than on the internal processes of the universities and colleges. This is the level of analysis where the government has the greatest expertise and the greatest potential impact.

The first element of an accountability framework should set out the government's goals for the postsecondary sector, as well as appropriate performance measures and sector-wide targets for each goal.

The second element should be to identify performance measures for each university or college, with targets that are specific to that institution's mission. The targets should be multi-year, and they should be negotiated between the government and the institution.

Third, the framework should contain an after-the-fact assessment of whether performance targets were met. The reporting should be quantitative, but should also include a qualitative assessment of whether appropriate progress was made. There is little merit in assessing institutions solely on the basis of small changes in quantitative measures.

Fourth and finally, the accountability framework should support purposeful action by both institutions and governments to achieve goals and targets. That is, the framework must be clear on where responsibility lies for initiating next steps as required, and must set out the process to be followed. There must be a clear and predictable link between performance and funding or regulations. Importantly, the framework must contain binding commitments by the government as well as by institutions.

One benefit of this approach is that it provides a basis for recognizing the differences among institutions. Institutions that enrol borderline students and make them into good students deserve at least as much recognition as institutions that enrol top students and make them into stars.

Compared with the status quo, the accountability framework I have described would ask more probing questions about what universities do and how well they do it.

I doubt that it would reduce the time spent reporting on what universities do – but it would put that time to better use.

The framework would provide the basis for a better dialogue with governments, and with the public at large, about what may reasonably be expected of universities and what resources the public is prepared to provide to have these expectations met.

As a Council, we have much work to do to make this framework a reality. But I offer it as a potential way of moving forward from a situation that has caused frustration for universities

and governments alike. I look forward to any thoughts you may have during our discussions this afternoon.

### A HIGHER ACCOUNTABILITY

My remarks in this speech have been mostly utilitarian. But I should like to leave you with a somewhat more elevated view of accountability. The Glion Declaration is a statement by a group of American university presidents and European rectors that describes their aspirations for universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here in small part is how it goes:

In a society of shifting goals and uncertain values, the university must stand for something more than accurate data and reliable information: more even than useful knowledge and dependable standards. The university is the custodian not only of knowledge, but also of the values on which that knowledge depends; not only of professional skills, but of the ethical obligations that underlie those professional skills; not only of scholarly inquiry, disciplined learning, and broad understanding, but of the means that make inquiry, learning, and understanding possible.

And that, colleagues, is the ideal, the spirit, and the cause to which we are ultimately accountable, and to which all other accountabilities are subordinate. If, as we go about the hard business of trimming budgets and accounting for expenditures, we can occasionally catch a glimpse of that, we will be all right.