

EDITORIAL

Perched on the tip of Point Grey and somewhat enclosed by water, forest, and (except on the darkest, coldest days) nudists, the University of British Columbia can seem a long way from the society it serves. Some of our other universities show similar tendencies: Simon Fraser on a “mountain” in (often) the fog, the University of Victoria in a quail field north of Victoria, and the University of Northern British Columbia well up a difficult-to-maintain road west of Prince George. When to this physical isolation are added recondite (often thoroughly pretentious) academic languages that repel intelligent outsiders, the problem of communication is compounded. The universities tend to become islands to themselves, the public (finding little for them in such exclusive places) loses patience with their expense, and the funds that sustain the islands become harder and harder to come by.

Applied fields — those producing the explicit technologies and skills required by government, industry, and business — are relatively immune to this censure. The public does not want to read their literatures, but knows it needs their products and is willing to pay for them. Faculties of arts, and to a lesser extent the pure sciences, are another matter. The relevance of their teaching and research is less immediately obvious, less immediately useful. In cost-cutting times, they begin to seem expendable luxuries. Across Canada, faculties of arts are declining in size; at UBC the decline (measured in full-time faculty) is in the order of twenty percent over the last decade. Retirees are not replaced, classes get larger, the faculty ages.

For this state of affairs our universities, and particularly our faculties of arts, are themselves partly to blame. They are not very good communicators at the best of times, and there has been confusion about what should be communicated to whom. In the 1960s social scientists were

supposed to fix societies somewhat as engineers fixed bridges. Such social science is now largely discredited, and many able scholars, well aware of the power of the printed word and the partiality of knowledge, are hesitant to privilege their own voices — especially when writing about peoples whose own voices have been insufficiently heard. At the same time, universities tend to reward those who adopt the specialized, often inaccessible languages of international academic fashion. Such tendencies enormously complicate the problem of communication between universities and their immediate publics.

And yet our universities provide far more than technology and professional expertise. They are the location of a great deal of our collective cultural memory — about human societies through the ages, about the ideas they have produced, about their arts and letters. They provide an enormous amount of digested, interpreted understanding of the world we currently live in — its distant corners as well as its places nearby. And, at various scales, they provide a measure of detached, critical analysis of the direction of contemporary society. They do not, and cannot, offer *the* truth and they cannot speak with one voice, but in sum they are huge reservoirs of knowledge, creativity, and talent. For the good of all concerned, they sorely need to interact much more actively with their own surrounding societies.

This is one of the central functions of *BC Studies*. A point of interaction between BC and its universities, its principal fare is good, accessible academic writing on this province. Scholarship on BC is lively now because the province itself is lively and fractious, and because the issues here, however distinctive in detail, are issues elsewhere and have generated much international thought and writing. Good scholarship on BC burrows into both this province and broader literatures, and *BC Studies*, issue by issue, brings such work to public attention.

This issue is another case in point. Its articles explore the imperious resource requirements of large places and their impact on small ones; the role of women in industrial protests and, by extension, their emerging role in the political life of this province; and the record of assimilationist approaches to aboriginal questions. These are important matters addressed with knowledge and care. So it is with *BC Studies*. The journal sits at the crucial, underdeveloped interface between the province's universities and its larger society. We welcome any suggestions about how we may enhance this relationship.

The Editors