

STUDENT PROTEST

By DR. J. A. L. MATHESON

Delivered at a meeting of the Medico-Legal Society held on 16th August, 1969, at 8.30 p.m., at the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, Spring Street, Melbourne. The Chairman of the meeting was the President, Dr. T. H. Hurley.

THIS is a subject that is particularly topical at the present time, but it is wise to begin by recalling that it is by no means a new subject, and that students in all ages and in all countries have protested about something or other. What is it then that marks out this generation, and these students, from a former generation of students? It is clear, I think, that they are different, if only because they are now being listened to.

There seem to be quite a lot of things that distinguish this generation of students from their predecessors. I think they are more socially conscious; certainly more concerned about the world and the direction in which it is going; probably better informed; undoubtedly affected by modern methods of communication, especially television; probably more conscious than previous generations of the impact of science upon the progress of events in the world; perhaps more knowledgeable about the sheer mechanics of politics. At any rate, whether these things really do differentiate this generation of students from earlier ones the fact is that the student world is quite different, and probably permanently different, from the world in which you and I grew up. Now, whether this is to the benefit of mankind, or whether it is to the benefit of universities I really do not know, but it certainly makes the job of operating universities a lot more difficult than it used to be, a lot more worrying, and involving a lot more emotional involvement of the senior people.

I propose to hang my remarks mainly on what I saw in America during the early months of this year, when I was fortunate enough to visit a few American universities, but before one attempts to compare the American scene with the Australian one ought to have a look at the continent of Europe, and perhaps at South America, in order to understand what has really been happening. May I begin by saying that the phenomenon of student unrest is difficult to understand because it is at so many different levels, but one has to recognize, first of all, that in many

universities around the world, including Australia, there are many things that need to be put right. If you go to France and ask yourself why the Sorbonne blew up a few years ago, you have to concede that it blew up because it ought to have blown up. It was an institution which had been established in the Napoleonic regime—for all I know specified by Napoleon himself—and it had become totally inadequate for the requirements of modern France. In the crudest terms, it had capacity for perhaps 10,000 students, but it had 100,000 students on its rolls; in order to be sure of hearing a professor at twelve o'clock you had to turn up at eight o'clock and sit through all the successive lectures in order to be sure of a place at the lecture of the person you really had wanted to hear. This is inconceivable, of course, in our situation, but I know that it was the case in France.

It is well known that in Italy, where there has been a great deal of trouble, professors are able to hold Chairs and simultaneously to be Members of Parliament and so neglect the duties for which they were primarily appointed.

In Germany, as many of you will know, the authoritarian regime of the German professor was such that the lowly undergraduate had a very poor deal.

And so one has to start off from the point that in many universities in many countries, students had a lot to complain about. I do not think that this is true in our country, but it is certainly true on the continent of Europe; it is also true in the universities of America where, because of the tremendous development of graduate schools, and because of the over-emphasis on the "publish or perish" philosophy which the great universities have pursued for many years, the ordinary undergraduate has had a pretty rough time.

Let me give you one example of this. I was in Harvard in May and I condense that experience to two incidents. One was a conversation that I had with a senior professor who knows Australia well, who said, "You know the student in this University, where we have a staff-student ratio of 1:2, really enjoys the greatest opportunity that is available in the world today. Here he has the opportunity of making contact with famous men in a way that cannot be matched anywhere. I have office hours, and at 11 o'clock every Monday, any student can come to talk to me about my subject. Of course, they never come, but there you are, they have this wonderful opportunity". The other conversation I had was with a young African student, as it happened, who was a member

of that organization which exists to show visitors through the university. My wife and I were members of a party which he was showing round and we reached a new building. I do not remember exactly what it was, but he said, "This is the new building for Economics"—or whatever it was. He went on, "The top floors are devoted to teaching, and all the other floors are devoted to research. That is what is wrong with this place. The whole staff occupies itself with research, and takes no notice of the students whatsoever".

I simply report those two conversations and, in a way, they epitomise the generation gap. I think it is beyond question that in the most prestigious of American universities there has grown up a tremendous gap between the senior members of the university and the undergraduates. There is that curious sardonic phrase, "The Airport Professor", who is never quite in his own university but is always taking a plane to somebody else's university, or perhaps to Washington in order to organize a research contract. One does not want to over-emphasize this, but the fact is that a lot of the elementary duties that universities should perform are not being performed satisfactorily. Maybe this has always been so, but you and I put up with it; we grumbled about "Old So-and-So" who could not be heard; or "Old-Somebody-Else" whose writing could not be read on the blackboard; and I have often heard stories about certain professors, in the great universities of this country, who really left something to be desired so far as their undergraduate teaching was concerned. So let us be honest about it and say that even on a fairly elementary level universities have some questions to answer that are rather difficult to answer and, indeed, to which they do not know the answers. For example, when I look at the examination results each year, knowing as I do the kind of mechanism by which these results have been produced, I always hope that nobody asks me unanswerable questions about the examination system. For example, when the same group of students takes the same four subjects—let us say first year medical students, all brilliant young men, nowadays so carefully selected that they are really all potential first-class Honours students—it would be a reasonable piece of statistics, which the lawyers here would accept, that one would expect them to perform equally well, or approximately equally well, in all the subjects on which they are examined. However, the facts are sometimes different and there are occasionally differences in pass rates that are rather hard to explain

but, of course, everybody knows that there is still much to be learned about the sheer basic technology of teaching and examining. These important areas are still not fully explored, by a long way, although professors of education know more than has yet penetrated into departments of history, or physics, or economics. However, we are getting more conscious of our responsibilities in these and related areas, and getting more careful and more conscientious about how we discharge these responsibilities. This is certainly true in this country, and perhaps all round the world, and it is probable that our sensitivity to these questions has been sharpened by student protests. These worries about the efficiency and propriety of university activity are part of the background of student protest, but do not let us suppose that it is the whole explanation by a long way. Perhaps for the first time in the Western world it has been discovered that universities, as well as being educational institutions, are part of society and part of the political scene and are, therefore, susceptible to political manipulation and political pressure. In the last few years it has been discovered, for the first time, and I do not know how this came to light, that pressure can be put upon Governments and upon society through the universities; and so the unrest, the unease, the dissatisfaction that arises from the deficiencies of universities that I have just been describing can, if you feel so disposed, be manipulated for other purposes, and that is what is happening. I do not pretend to understand the reason why this discovery has only just been made but, of course, the kind of issues that are now being pressed through the universities are those that have worried young people for all time—and rightly so.

In America the issues are manifold. First of all, and foremost in the minds of all young people, is the war in Vietnam which, I think one can say without exaggeration, all young people in America detest. It is immaterial whether they are right or wrong in this; maybe they do not see all the complications; maybe they do not realize that Communism will probably sweep over Southeast Asia when the Americans pull out of Vietnam. This does not concern them. What they can see is that their country is doing in Vietnam things that they cannot stand, and this is the great emotional drive for a great deal of the student protest in America. They are personally involved, too, because they are all conscripted, and they are conscripted through the mechanism of laws that lead to injustice because of the operations of local Draft

Boards which really do not function in a satisfactory manner. So, feeling as they do this deep abhorrence—I do not think it is too strong to use the word “abhorrence”—of war in general and of the war in Vietnam in particular, and being liable to be swept into it, students in America are very ready to protest.

As well as conscription and Vietnam there is the awful division of American society over the colour question which has now, after all sorts of changes of emphasis, reached the universities in a particularly poignant and difficult way. The argument goes roughly like this: there are, perhaps, 25 million blacks in America out of a total population of 150 million, or whatever it is. One would, therefore, expect that the ratio in the universities would approximate this, but it does not—nothing like it. It certainly does not in the student body; it certainly does not in the faculty. And why should this be? Everybody knows why it is: the black people do not have the educational opportunities which would enable them to go to the university. Those universities which would like to employ more black staff than they do cannot find them because these people have not been sufficiently well educated to enable them to take their place upon the university faculty; and so the black people are saying, “We must have more black students in universities”.

This cry is echoed by the Mexican Americans, by the Puerto Ricans—but significantly not yet by the poorer white people who are also under-privileged. So one of the great issues in American universities at the present time is how to bring more under-privileged people into the student body, how to get a greater and more reasonable proportion of coloured people on to the faculties. The more percipient universities, because they have been suddenly caught by this question, are now taking desperate emergency measures to try to change the situation. But it is hard to know what to do because student protest, which has now become part of the everyday political scene and has become entangled with the black protest movement, militates against a careful rational attempt to solve this difficult problem.

Some universities believe that it is so urgent to improve the ratio of black to white students that they must accept black students who would not otherwise get into the university, just because of the sheer necessity of increasing the number of under-privileged students in the student body.

This is being done, for example, at the Los Angeles campus of the University of California where last year they took in some

150 students who would not otherwise have been admitted and who were really, to be frank, unprepared for university work. They took these chaps in and gave them special teaching and special coaching, and so on. Many academics are very doubtful whether these students can, in fact, succeed in spite of all the special tutorials, but I was told only the other day that of these 150 students who were taken in beyond the quota about 100 have survived the first year and it is expected that they will eventually graduate.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the selection system is heavily biased in favour of those who have educational advantages and that it has the effect of excluding those who have educational disadvantages, even if they have the natural talent to get much further than they do at present.

The main question, though, to which I want to draw your attention is why the student explosion should have occurred now, since none of the possible explanations is new: certainly the deficiencies of universities are not new; certainly the war in Vietnam is not really new because it has been going on for quite a time and was preceded by Korea; certainly the discrimination against black students is far from new; so why has all this suddenly blown up in the United States? I think that it is probably the result of an accidental discovery which has proved to be very far-reaching.

The present situation began, in my view, with the explosion at Berkeley in 1964 which had unexpectedly profound results. What happened, if you remember, was that some administrator decided to be a bit tough in enforcing a regulation about the collection of funds for political purposes on the campus; there are evidently some rules about this in the University of California. Whoever it was who was collecting funds was not obeying these rules and the students then decided to continue to disobey them. Before anybody knew what was happening, all this had blown up into the issue of freedom of speech and then suddenly somebody conceived the idea of invading the administration building and staying there. This was a tremendous event for it had suddenly been discovered that, if a sufficiently large number of students moves in a certain direction, it is extremely hard to stop them. Thus the size factor suddenly made itself apparent.

There are at the present time at least 5 million students in the United States, and this is an awful lot of people. I was speaking yesterday in Horsham which has a population, I discovered, of

10,800 souls so that it is rather smaller than my university; even in Australia, therefore, there are now so many young people in universities that if they all decide that they want the same thing it is extremely hard to stop them. This was the discovery that was made at Berkeley and it is a discovery which swept across America and is now being felt in Australia.

In both countries there are large numbers of young people who are motivated in much the same directions, who can very readily be led to think in similar ways about particular issues if the arguments are carefully thought out and presented, and it suddenly dawned on people who were thinking along certain lines that here was a very powerful means of exerting pressure, not only on university authorities to improve their ways, but also upon governments; and this is what is now happening. There is no doubt about the efficacy of these methods: they stopped President Johnson from standing for another term and they strongly influence opinion on Vietnam, colour and other issues. I have no doubt whatsoever that the political pressure which is now being exerted through the universities is here for all time, and we might as well get around to realizing that this is the case.

I have talked mainly about Berkeley because this is the most striking text book example of my subject, but it is worthwhile having a look at some other universities in America and seeing whether they have been involved in student unrest or not. It is worth looking, for example, at the other side of the continent at Columbia and New York universities. Both are big universities on Manhattan Island; both are very prestigious; both are alongside poor areas: Columbia alongside Harlem; New York down at the bottom end of Manhattan close to Greenwich Village with its negro and Puerto Rican population. But there the similarity ends. Columbia has been through a dreadful experience and is only just beginning to creep out from the wreckage of the fearful upheaval of a year or so ago. New York University on the other hand, although by no means immune from the pressures of today, is still functioning and still able to say that it is surviving; it has weathered the storm, or the storms, at the very least. What is the difference between these two? What is the difference in attitude, in style of administration, in reaction to the situation, that has brought one almost to a standstill and enables the other to survive? One can recognize some rather striking differences between the two: Columbia is an Ivy League university dedicated to

academic scholarship of the highest order; somewhat—perhaps very—insensitive to Harlem, right alongside; certainly having a rather authoritarian kind of administration, with a long tradition of Presidents who made up their own minds as to what was to be done and got on with it, and not used at all to widespread faculty collaboration and consultation. New York university, on the other hand, has a long tradition of involvement in service to its community. It has a large and famous medical school, running two huge hospitals which pride themselves on never having turned away a patient; it has legal aid schemes; it has schemes for teaching Puerto Rican immigrants to speak English; it has an involvement with its neighbours which is really of a different order of magnitude from that of Columbia. Maybe this is not the full explanation of the different experiences of the two, but certainly a lot of Americans think that it has something to do with it. In their present anguish a lot of American universities are asking “What is our responsibility in the urban crisis?” “What must we do in order to bring our intellectual powers and our capacities to bear upon the problems of the cities in which we live?” This is one positive thing that they are thinking about as a possible way out of their troubles but, while necessary, it is unlikely to be sufficient. When one attempts to translate the American experience to the Australian, one finds that there are so many things that are so much better here than in America that one asks oneself what have Australian students to worry about at all. Our universities, although lamentably short of funds, in spite of efforts of the Australian Universities Commission, have a tradition of responsible, careful teaching, which is certainly very much better than that obtaining in many American universities which do not treat their undergraduate students as well as their graduates. On the other hand we do find ourselves involved in the Vietnam War and in conscription, although the draft hits our students much less sharply than it does their opposite numbers abroad. We are spared the colour problem, fortunately. So one asks oneself why the student protest movement should have begun to have an impact in Australia. There are several reasons, I think: one is the sheer imitativeness of mankind. The speed with which ideas, or fallacies if you like, go around the world these days is really very great indeed; if one sees a riot on Broadway on the television you can be almost sure that something similar will happen in Monash, or Sydney,

within a few hours. This is one of the explanations of what is happening here and it is a very important one.

But one has to face the fact that the great majority of students in our universities, although sympathetic to opposition to the war in Vietnam and extremely reluctant to be involved in conscription, and although critical of some aspects of university administration would not, in actual fact, become revolutionary were it not that a small number of students has decided to exploit the situation and stage regular confrontations.

In my own university, and I now come right home, there is a small group of students whose object in life is to wreck the place, and who take every opportunity of attempting to do so. And so I find myself engaged every day in what is rather like guerilla warfare. The rules of the game are being worked out and are almost at the point of being codified as in Australian Rules football. The game is played roughly like this: the preliminaries take place in "The Bakery", in Prahran, where students from Monash and other universities, helped along by one or two colleagues from elsewhere, sit down and decide on strategy. This involves picking out a whole series of issues that are to be pressed in the hope that at least one will gather a lot of support from the general student body. Thus the broadsheets that are distributed round the university will deal with Vietnam on Monday, conscription on Tuesday, germ warfare on Wednesday, and so on. Bougainville was a "penny from heaven" that was completely unanticipated, but the thing is so swift moving that it is possible to change the point of pressure at a few minutes' notice. If Bougainville had not turned up it would have been something else.

At Monash there has been a long argument about the Discipline Statute; at La Trobe the college system has been blamed for hindering the growth of a proper S.R.C.; but at any university it is easy to draw up a whole list of grievances which can be brought up as required. They are brought to the fore in a more or less random order, and are either pressed or discarded according to the response: the responders, of course, are the general body of students. Some issues prove to be effective in rousing up the general body of students, while others are less so. Those that turn out to be most successful are pressed harder and harder and, with luck, lead to a real confrontation. This is the situation in which all universities now find themselves, some more intensively than others, but all of them to some extent; this is a

total change which has overtaken the university world in the last few years. What is our counter-strategy? I do not think that I am very successful at this unexpected turn of events, and I certainly ought not to say too much about our plans. But I can at least say that all of us are attempting to prevent the issues that are being brought up in succession from coming to the point where large numbers of students will support them. This new situation requires senior members of the University to be in continual contemplation of strategy, and so we now live in a different world from the one we thought we were entering when we first joined universities many years ago.

My last point but one is that one has to recognize that in some ways the students are right. The world that we live in has a lot of things wrong with it and all of us, if we are honest, must agree that it would be a good thing if many of them could be put right. On the other hand it is depressing that the methods that are being used, even if they are really being used with good intent will, if we are not careful, destroy the universities as we have known them perhaps not for the reasons that the students themselves might anticipate—by the massive intervention of the State—but by the corrosion of the old relationship between a student and his professor. This is already happening, and it is far more dangerous than any risk of the Premier or his Ministers seizing the universities with an iron hand.

I have been a university teacher now for over 30 years, and I number among my friends many former students whom I am glad to meet and talk to and whose fellowship I have enjoyed, not only recently, but when they were students. I think that many of you will look back with pleasure at the relationship you built up with your seniors in the universities. There is a real danger that this is going to be destroyed and, if the universities do lose this relationship, then much of what we value will vanish.

My final point is that I regret that nobody laughs any more, even though in my position it is sometimes very hard to find things to laugh at. I do regret that so many of our students are so deadly serious, that they have stopped making use of sarcasm and irony, and that the humour that used to lighten their affairs seems to have gone. It is, therefore, with some pleasure that I am able to reveal to this Society the only amusing comment on the situation that I have yet seen published. There is a report—I cannot vouch for its accuracy—that a letter was sent by the

Warden and Fellows of Wadham College, Oxford, to a group of students who had presented a list of non-negotiable demands. It read as follows:

Dear Gentlemen: We note your threat to take what you call "direct action" unless your demands are immediately met. We feel that it is only sporting to let you know that our governing body includes three experts in chemical warfare, two ex-commandos skilled with dynamite and at torturing prisoners, four qualified marksmen in both small arms and rifles, two ex-artillerymen, one holder of the Victoria Cross, four karate experts, and a chaplain. The governing body has authorized me to tell you that we look forward with confidence to what you call a "confrontation", and I may say even with anticipation.

Discussion

DR. AINSLIE MEARES: I would like to comment on three aspects of matters about which Dr. Matheson has spoken. I would like to comment about the motivation of behaviour as applied to student protests, about the importance of identification in the psychological development of young people, and about the psychological significance of setting limits to behaviour.

Of course, I see the student in a vastly different way to what Dr. Matheson does. I see students as patients, and, of necessity, I see many fewer, but I see them in what we might call depth. Dr. Matheson spoke of the idealism of the students particularly in America about the Vietnam war. This idealism is something that comes up continually in psycho-therapy with students. This idealism of students is really something quite inspiring. Unlike Dr. Matheson, I do not think that this very real idealism of the young people is the only cause of the protest. I think that idealism on its own leads to people getting a kind of abstract philosophy about idealism. Behaviour is determined at more than one level, and, unless the idealism has this other level functioning, the idealism just remains as an abstraction. Again, in dealing with students, the thing that seems to be consistent with them is the urge to be independent, the urge of self-expression, the urge of self-assertion. Without this other thing, I do not think the idealism involves people in real protests at all.

Now, this urge of self-expression is really a biologically determined thing. It comes of the young man wanting to be independent. He wants to be a man in his own right. To be free of his

father, and free of the institutions which his father has organized, he has this urge to dissociate himself, and with the students I see in psychotherapy of any depth, this is a consistent pattern. I think it is this urge that the young person has that makes him ready to protest, and that the idealism that Dr. Matheson has referred to, about the Vietnam War and other principles, gives the biological urge the colour and the nature, and determines the way in which the protest is actually manifested. The evidence for this would really be quite obvious, because if there is a protest on, there will be some students protesting for more books in the Library, others for the war in Vietnam, others for legal abortion, and others against hanging. The only thing that is consistent is the need to protest, and I believe this comes from this sort of biological situation of the young person, and it is the idealism which channels a protest into any particular form.

If this is so, then what can we do about it to help the student. Dr Matheson said "What steps can we make to counter this?" and I would say that one is the importance of identification in the development of the young man's personality. Identification is a fact of life. The young person identifies with his teacher, or the person in authority over him, to whom he is close. The evidence for this is commonplace. We know how students and young people take on the mannerisms, the figures of speech, the attitudes of mind of those that teach them, so it would seem obvious that we should expose our young people to teachers of mature personality. Now, of course this is something that has simply not happened. The Universities have expanded very quickly, and many people of immature and ill-formed personality teach the students. The students identify with these, and gain greater and greater instability, instead of learning to integrate their personalities. The type of situation which does the greatest harm in this respect, and this is again on the evidence of talking to students, is the way that they identify with teachers who have got a chip on their shoulders, people who have got paranoid traits. These are unstable people. The student takes on the attitude of his teacher, and so becomes very ready to protest and blow off and upset the University. Now, we want our young people to be exposed to teachers with liberal ideas, liberal free thinking, so that the young people can think widely and express their idealism. Let the teacher be as far left, or as far right, as you like, but I do feel that the people who are in contact with our young people should be of reasonably stable personality, so that the student can

identify with them. They can then express their idealism in ways that are useful to themselves and useful to the society in which they live.

The third point again follows Dr. Matheson saying, "Well, what counter measures can we take?" There is a principle of setting limits to behaviour. We value that frame very highly, and rightly so; but we find regulations and restrictions constrict us, they frustrate us, they increase our anxiety. So, in order to help our young people, we place them in Universities, and give them very great freedom. We do this out of kindness. We do this in the belief that in their great freedom, they will experience ease of mind, a feeling of well-being because there is none of this constriction. Now, this is where there is a great paradox. Unlimited freedom does not give security and calmness. It, in fact, produces anxiety, because the person has no guide lines to know how far he can go. He has not got any signposts about his behaviour, so instead of doing students a kindness in giving them unlimited freedom, we are, in fact, inviting them to antisocial behaviour, because they will, of necessity, out of their boundless desert vacuum kind of freedom test the limits which, of course, must bring them into contact with the Administration. To help our students, I feel that we should set limits to behaviour. They would then have some guide lines, some indications, something to test their conduct against.