

# Dr. MacKinnon Discusses Role Of Education In Assessing Public Opinion

"Man's survival may well depend on his ability to understand public opinion. Its weaknesses and strengths," Dr. Frank MacKinnon, principal of Prince of Wales College, emphasized in an address delivered last evening at the annual convention dinner of the Maritime Institute of Chartered Accountants. The dinner was held at The Charlottetown and was largely attended.

"Taking for his subject, 'Opinion and Imagination,' Dr. MacKinnon dealt particularly with the necessity of encouraging young people to use their heads, control their emotions and imagination and seek the truth.

"One of the great natural attributes of the human animal is his imagination," he pointed out. "It enables him to dream and his dreams have carried him through many achievements since the beginning of human history. But, like all good things, it requires careful use and constant check to prevent imagination from getting out of control or from carrying its possessor into disaster. Imagination must be carefully confined by common sense.

"A study of public opinion, and

indeed, of individual thinking illustrates clearly how frequently we allow our imagination to run wild. Crowds can be whipped into frenzied, but unscrupulous, enthusiasm by unscrupulous, but glib tongued demagogues, while persons are easily misled by gossip of the most uncertain origin. Political psychologists have frequently warned that there is much truth in Adolph Hitler's dictum that the bigger the lie the easier it is to believe it; it is not difficult to move a mob by emotion rather than facts.

"The individual is sometimes just as illogical. 'Have you heard of John Smith?' a man was asked. 'Yes,' he replied. 'He was a terrible drunkard.' 'No,' said the other, 'he never drank in his life. He was president of the Temperance Society.' 'That's it,' was the response. 'I knew he had some connection with liquor.' One of the unfortunate characteristics of man is this tendency to fill in what he doesn't know with his emotion or imagination.

### Public Opinion

"We who live in democratic countries claim that government should be based on the free operation of public opinion. It is logical, therefore, to require that public opinion be carefully understood and that its weaknesses be appreciated. In our individual lives, too, practically everything we do depends on the exercise of our judgment; how weak this judgment can be at times should be of personal concern. The study of mass communication and individual whim is one of the prerequisites of success in any field.

"The world is so big that living creatures are able to comprehend only a tiny portion of it and their abilities are limited by this colossal ignorance. A polar bear would be obviously bewildered if he were suddenly thrust into a meeting of chartered accountants, although perhaps if he came often enough he might get used to it. Humans, like polar bears, have a limited range of experience, but they have many means by which the gaps in their knowledge are filled—literature, art, radio, newspapers, advertising and others.

"Indeed the vast proportion of human 'knowledge' is second hand and much of man's life is spent trying to understand it. What do we know about President Truman other than what is told us by observers? Do we really know anything at all about Russia, and how can the Russians possibly understand us? Why do we use a certain toothpaste or buy a particular mining stock—do we know the facts about either? Why must Paris fashions affect the buying habits of American housewives? Do we actually understand why we hold some of our most cherished beliefs?

"In so many things we must admit that we rely on others to fill in the gaps in our experience while they rely on still others in a never ending circle. It is startling sometimes to see how little control we have over what we know and what we do.

### Unchecked Imagination

"What is the explanation of such fallibility of human understanding? The most logical seems to be that we see so little that we tend to fill in the gaps in our minds with pure imagination; we frequently act, not on what we see, but on what we think we see. The trouble comes when we do this so readily and so unconsciously that we fail to distinguish between what is fact and what is imagination. When emotion obscures the whole process our powers of thought are immediately impaired.

"Salesmen, teachers, politicians, clergymen, entertainers, newspapermen, and others who deal with humans in the mass know the tremendous importance of imagination and the emotion which stimulates it. A stirring reference to Sir Wilfred Laurier in a political speech will rouse the enthusiasm of loyal Liberals; a hammer and sickle, swastika, maple leaf, or picture of John Bull will stimulate patriotic feeling; and the statements of successful movie stars seem to sell almost any soap or cosmetic.

"Such symbols can serve a good and useful purpose; but they can also be used to fool the people who accept them by creating a wrong impression of a set of facts. To understand the significance of symbols which sooth the eye, the ear or the fancy is fundamental in selling goods or ideas. To appreciate what is symbol and what is fact is a prerequisite to seeking the truth.

"Gossip is a common every-day phenomena which is harmless if not taken too seriously. The fact that Mrs. A wore a particular dress at a party, or Mr. B was reported as seeking political appointment are very significant facts when whispered over the back fence or at the club. Often such news is accepted and enjoyed as rumor. But when it is passed on in garbled form as fact and allowed to grow out of all proportion to its truth and significance, it becomes a public menace. It is surprising how gullible people can be in accepting what is pure fiction and basing their opinions and actions on it. Again the remedy is an enquiring mind which questions before accepting.

### Real Education

"Here then is the clue to real knowledge, real education. If there are such things. Education is not merely the acquisition of facts and ideas, not merely the learning of certain technical processes—these are very uncertain in an uncertain world. Fundamental education is actually the ability to discriminate, to choose the significant from the trivial, to seek the truth. This ability is far

more useful and satisfying in life than any number of facts and ideas without it.

"Truth is very elusive and it is extremely easy to tell complete falsehoods without telling a lie. In other words the human mind can deceive itself with alarming facility. Witnesses in a law court, for example, will swear in all sincerity to things which never happened. An outstanding case involving a traffic accident brought a respectable lady who had seen the accident into the witness box. A pedestrian had been hit by a car and witness was asked to indicate the speed of the car. She said that she was standing on the inside rail of a double street car track and when the car passed she jumped back and was then standing on the inside rail of the other track.

"Counsel asked her if she was absolutely sure and she vehemently upheld the truth of her statement, even after counsel pointed out that, had she done what she said, she a very stout woman, had performed a standing backward eighteen-foot jump, surely a world athletic record!

"Psychologists consider themselves trained observers and students of human nature. But like the rest of us they can easily deceive themselves. A convention of psychologists once met near the site of a masquerade. The door was suddenly opened and in rushed a clown and a negro. The two stopped in the middle of the hall and fought fiercely; in the struggle one was shot. After the two were taken out of the hall the chairman told the assembled psychologists that they should write down what they saw so that their reports could be used as evidence of the crime.

"When the reports were collected the spectators in the grandstand were told it had all been carefully staged to test their powers of observation. Their embarrassment could be understood when it was found that of forty observers none had reported the correct facts; six were approximately right; twenty-four were half right, and ten were entirely wrong.

"These considerations lead to three conclusions, personal, educational and political.

"Each person spends a period of years as a tiny part of a complex society and he owes certain allegiances to his world and to his Creator. That is human life. He is not in a position to understand everything, but he is not obligated to understand as much as possible, since reason was provided him for the purpose? Satisfaction which he will gain from his life will depend, among other things, upon his ability to follow a purpose in life which he understands and which will bring

him happiness. It is easy to become confused in a world of facts, ideas, emotions, theories, loyalties which are gleaned from books, radios, speeches, newspapers, and endless numbers of societies of all kinds. What all men need is direction.

"One answer is clear thinking combined with control over imagination and emotion. Whether a man be a king or a cottager, an Albert Switzer or the Miller on the Des, a Socrates who 'knows himself' or a farmer who loves his land as a gift from God, his happiness will depend largely on his control of himself and of his ideas.

"From the standpoint of our subject tonight, it is an obligation of teachers to encourage young people to use their heads, control their emotions and imagination and seek the truth. Without such instruction the conventional school and college subjects are just so much window dressing.

"This is also a challenge for professional bodies, like you who meet here tonight. For you have a major share of the determination of the standards of training and professional conduct in your field, and each such group is responsible for an important phase of public business. Young recruits to accountancy, law, medicine, theology, teaching and so on should be trained to understand that these professional activities are not merely means of making a living, but ways of serving people, the nation and the world.

"It is their responsibility, not only to understand clearly the processes of their professions, but also to appreciate the significance of these in the society which will look to them for leadership. Professional bodies and educational authorities have done much together in this respect but the future will require even greater co-operation.

**A Task for Education**

"Here then is a task for education. Education is not merely the accumulation of facts and ideas; what good are they if a person can't use them? Nor is it training for a job, for success in any job requires far more than vocational training. The primary purpose of education is to develop the individual so that he can think for himself and to give him sufficient knowledge to increase the range of his mind. The amount of brains and of knowledge does not indicate the quality of education; rather it is the extent to which one uses the brains and knowledge which one has (whether great or little) that denotes the educated man.

**Of Vital Importance**

"Finally, the impact of opinion and imagination on the political world should be continually emphasized. They have inspired some of men's greatest achievements and they have caused some of his disastrous failures. Public opinion now plays a vast part in national and world affairs and whether it is enlightened or bewildered public opinion now depends on so many factors.

"Indeed, man's survival may well depend on his ability to understand public opinion, its weaknesses and strengths. Certainly democracy, which depends so fundamentally on an enlightened

public opinion, requires careful control of the imagination and emotion which move it.

"In times like these men must not allow their opinions and imagination to sink them in a mass of ill-considered prejudices and misconceptions, or lead them blindly through a fog of frenzied fanaticism into confusion and bewilderment. Rather they must permit these qualities to carry them on through a search for truth to a still higher and greater level of human achievement."

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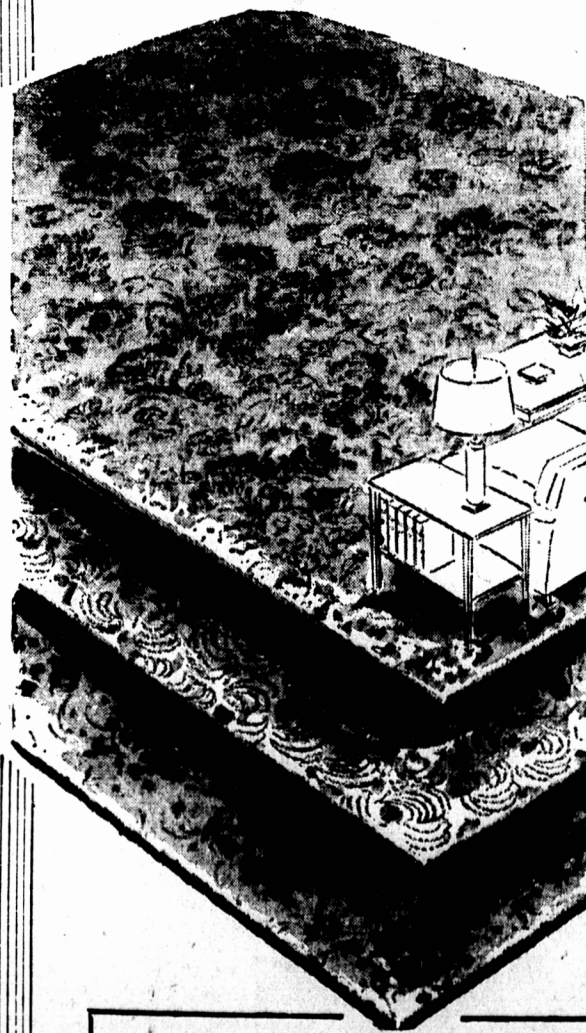
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