

The Art of Intimidation: Sexism and Destiny at Queen's

by Alison Dickie
This Magazine, March 1990

WHEN OUTBREAKS OF flagrant sexism on Ontario campuses broke into the news last fall, reports of panty raids at Wilfrid Laurier and sexual harassment cases at the University of Toronto paled beside the nasty reports in October from Queen's University in Kingston. The sexism came as no surprise to anyone who knew the university, but the courage shown by those women who staged a Sit-in in the principal's office was as admirable as the venom of the attacks on them was disturbing.

Television cameras and newspaper photographs showed men's residences sporting signs saying "'No' means 'Kick her in the teeth,'" "'No' means more beer," and "'No' means 'Down on your knees, bitch'" - signs put up as a response to the "'No' means 'No'" campaign against date rape sponsored by the student government. Although the Dean of Women ordered the signs taken down, they were still up a week later. The only faculty member besides the Dean of Women to publicly criticize the students and administration was Christine Overall, a young untenured professor in the philosophy department, who wrote a condemnation of the activities in the Kingston Whig-Standard. The university's principal remained silent.

Since the administration's silence condoned the actions of the men of Gordon House, it fell to women students to call attention to the issue of violence against women. So about a hundred women calling themselves "A Group of women" staged a twenty-nine-hour sit-in in principal David Smith's office. Wearing scarves across their faces to protect their identities, they presented a basic list of demands. It was the first broadly based feminist action in the university's history.

The media attention the sit-in drew to the issues came as an unpleasant surprise to the administration. Queen's public image is more often tied to its football team or the lavish Engineer's Ball, a black-tie affair sometimes given national magazine coverage. It is true that Queen's is equally famous for the drunken excesses of its homecoming weekends and its first-year orientation rituals, although these are usually passed off as part of the famous "Queen's spirit" commented on even by the Canadian Encyclopedia.

Although the signs were the flash-point, the real issue was the administration's attitudes to women's issues in what is one of the bastions of Canadian misogyny. At Queen's, such issues have two main focuses - discrimination against women and violence against women.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AT THE university is not limited just to verbal harassment and vicious signs. The number of crisis calls to the Kingston Sexual Assault Centre doubled from 1988 to 1989, for a total of 353 crisis calls and 2,124 information calls. Eighty-eight calls dealt with date rape alone. Fully half of the calls came from Queen's students (many calls were from incest survivors, who often begin to disclose after leaving home). In the same period, reported incidents of rape and sexual harassment also doubled. Queen's was not alone in this - studies done on Canadian campuses have shown that up to 50 per cent of women at those schools are the objects of sexual harassment.

The university had had its own sexual assault centre on campus, but it closed more than a year ago when funding was withdrawn. An indication of how important the administration considered the entire issue

came when the campus Women's Centre posted signs showing the locations of sexual assaults on campus, only to have the chief librarian (who said he'd never heard of a sexual assault on campus) order campus security to take them down. When "A Group of Women" in Principal Smith's office confronted him with these and other facts, he said that he hadn't known about the closure of the campus sexual assault centre.

QUEEN'S TRAINS A DISPROPORTIONATELY high percentage of the professional classes in Canada. Given the values that universities claim - and are publicly funded - to uphold, it is worth emphasizing how much of a betrayal of the public trust it is when they tolerate and even encourage the worst attitudes in our society.

There were certainly panty raids when I was at Queen's, but I remember "tubbing" better: men dressed up in ski masks and gloves would drag women from their rooms to throw them in bathtubs of cold water. In the early seventies, engineering students used to choose a female mascot for the coming year. Dubbed "Freshette Perfect," she would be held up to incoming students, the "frosh," as a paragon whose feet they were to kiss. Today, Freshette Perfect has been replaced by the "Golden Tit," a speedbump painted yellow, with a red circle for the nipple, which has become the object for various symbolic acts committed by engineering students.

Bizarre initiation rituals aren't unique to the engineering faculty; they extend across the university. The process, which revolves around drinking and obscenity, encourages a subordination of the individual to the school, and to the hierarchy led by the faculty. It also encourages the subordination of women to men. "Sport humping" is a relatively new ritual in orientation week. Though the activity reportedly originated with the engineering students, it has become used by all faculties during orientation week and is as follows: a woman lies or is pushed on the ground while a man does push-ups on top of her, before taking a coin from her mouth with his teeth.

This behaviour and the values it displays do not however, originate with the student-run orientation. Traditions are passed down from one generation to the next, and serve to reinforce the social structures from whence they come. The engineers are the most overt in their sexist attitudes, but they are certainly not unique. Drunken orientation proceedings to which the administration turns a tolerantly blind eye are superficial when compared to the kinds of harassment female professors experience when actually teaching at the university itself, combined with the hostile attitude towards a feminist perspective in general. Women professors were most often unwilling to comment on the issues raised in the sit-in, or to speak out publicly for fear of reprisals from male colleagues. These fears are solidly founded.

Lecturer Sheila McIntyre resigned her teaching position from Queen's law school in 1986 after a year of relentless harassment made it impossible for her to continue. Before she left, she drafted a lengthy memo to all members of the law school. In it she cites two explosive confrontations in her classroom where male students shouted her and female students down when they attempted to raise the question of gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language: "About six men were deliberately disruptive, uncooperative, interruptive and angry... They tried to prevent students who disagreed with their position from speaking, by a combination of insult, interruption, hostile gestures and increasingly voluble but untenable arguments. When I tried to legitimize the contributions of other students, they were equally abusive to me... Their bottom line, albeit only indirectly conveyed, was: 'We don't want to talk about gender and we won't; and we won't let anyone else either.' When their muscle-flexing failed to force me to move onto another case, one mutineer began shouting at me, insisting that the questions I had asked were irrelevant and a waste of time." The memo goes on to detail further accounts of threats and verbal

attacks on her by male students and then by faculty. The final insult was to learn that she was the object of pornographic attacks in sexual graffiti in the men's washroom.

THE SOCIAL/SEXUAL RITUALS practised by the students reflect the structure of the university itself. "Sport humping" is a way of keeping women in their place, sexually and intellectually prone, perhaps punishing them for being present in the university at all. The ambiguous position of female students is mirrored among the paid staff, and in the hierarchy. Only one in seven professors at Queen's is female (1986 statistics). And of the twenty-two deans and associate deans, only three are women: the Dean of Women, and the Dean and Associate Dean of Nursing. Women are likely to be found among the teaching assistants in the lowest-paid categories, and the support staff fare no better.

It is tough to find a professor who will outright condemn, not only orientation week, but the entrenched sexism of the university as a whole. Political science professor David Cox did say unequivocally that "Orientation week does not need to be tinkered with, it needs to be scrapped"; and philosophy professor Carlos Prado, who has taken to using gender-neutral language in his classes (without mutiny or insult), was willing to be quoted as saying there was a real need to have an independent women's studies department. But, by and large, male professors do not speak out against sexism.

The leadership on women's issues has therefore fallen to women students who get little support from the administration. As "A Group of Women" was quick to note, the principal waited for three weeks before issuing a statement condemning the actions of the male students who put up the original signs, and then only when media attention resulted in letters of protest - and threats to withhold fundraising contributions - from alumni concerned about the safety of their daughters.

Successful as the protest was- the students got the beard of trustees to give \$10,000 to the Kingston Sexual Assault Centre, and the position of the Dean of Women was reaffirmed - there was personal cost to the students involved. Several days after the protest one of them told me "You don't see many women on campus wearing their scarves" - a reference to the scarves the sit-in protestors wore to conceal their identities. Many of these women said they were afraid of retaliation, though they were willing to risk it. Women who were associated with the pro-test, both students and faculty, have received harassment phone calls. One woman arrived home at night to find a car parked in front of her house holding four men she recognized from an earlier encounter over the signs. When they saw that she was with another person they drove off. Another protester was punched by a woman when she tried to explain her reasons for her action, and was told that the protest would only cause men to be more violent to all other women in future.

THE MORNING AFTER The Massacre at the Montreal école polytechnique, three Queen's faculty members spotted an effigy strung up in a tree perhaps, but not certainly, female, with what looked like a T-square through the neck. It's clear from this and other reports (one alleges a male student walked into a classroom pretending to have a machine-gun, and made bang-bang sounds at the women) that the battle to make the university a place of dignity and safety for women has a long way to go. Men have found it easier to tolerate the changing place of women in society as long as they remained in the traditionally female spheres; while keeping only token numbers in the male dominated sciences and applied sciences. As long as women kept their place, as long as the professors were men, as long as the intellectual traditions remained intact and the language gender-specific, men could concede a corner of their world. But the fact that the gender battles seem to have heated up on campuses is a sign that men feel threatened by the trend towards academic equality.

In her study of the homecoming and orientation rituals, anthropology professor Lucia Nixon noted that the purple dye engineers used to distinguish themselves from other faculties is the same colour as the ink squids exude when they feel under threat. Although it is not the source of sexism at Queen's, the engineering faculty is the place where it is most obvious.

Women approach the 50 per cent mark in other fields - 48 per cent in law, 45 per cent in medicine, 50 per cent in the biological sciences - but they account for only three per cent of all Canadian engineers. No other profession is so emblematic of the masculine culture that has reshaped the world since the Industrial Revolution, and applied science is perhaps the only faculty where four years' training virtually guarantees admission to the ranks of the highest-paid and most respected layers of society. No doubt Marc Lepine felt that women - "feminists" as he said- were responsible for his feelings of inadequacy, taking what he felt was his rightful place in a school of engineering. Perhaps that's why the fighting is so fierce at the moment at Queen's and elsewhere - precisely because the stakes are so high.