

THE VISION OF WILLIAM F. RYAN

Colin B. Mackay^{*}

These thoughts on my many years of association with Dean William F. Ryan of the University's Faculty of Law are being jotted down on an overcast and dreary day in mid-March, that time of year when the irritability quotient on campus tends to rise. Now in reflecting back over those years when the two of us served together, I realize how often I tended to look for guidance and advice from Bill Ryan during such periods. His judgment, both of individuals and events, always was sound. Irrational behavior on the part of others may often have caused annoyance and frustration, but it did not blur Bill's vision of the principal objective and main thrust in our activity as he attempted to arrive at carefully thoughtout and planned goals.

This morning on entering the campus of the University of New Brunswick in Saint John I spotted a newly erected sign "Vote Hoyt for President", a reminder that the campaign for the next Students' Representative Council (SRC) is now underway. This took me back to the second term of the year 1940 in Fredericton when I acted as Bill's campaign manager in his run for the office of SRC President. Such events were low key affairs during our student days; no posters, just a few small notices and the usual talk. But both of us worked on the Brunswickan and so we had access to cardboard posters and type. We ran off several of them reading "Vote for Ryan - A Democratic President". The man who would one day serve as Dean of Law was a quiet individual, self-contained and not well known amongst the student body of a little more than 400. His opponent was a local boy from Fredericton who tended to be a bit dogmatic with very definite views. Bill won the contest without any difficulty. The word "Democratic" on those posters appeared to have had the desired effect.

In the year which followed, he presided over the affairs of the Students' Council with a quiet competence which gave a good indication of his capacity to develop a sound organization and provide it with the necessary leadership. Now, in retrospect, I believe my use of the word "democratic" on those posters was the correct one. While always a card-carrying Liberal in the political sense, Bill was in reality very much the courteous conservative - from his dress and deportment to his quiet approach to problems. But once convinced he was on the right track he then dug in his heels with a determination which, nine times out of ten, carried things through to a successful conclusion.

I feel certain that both faculty colleagues and students sensed this quality in their dealings with him. Here was someone who approached them in a no nonsense and straight forward manner, who was essentially decent and never

^{*}President Emeritus, University of New Brunswick

devious – a totally honest and honorable human being. He was less flamboyant than almost anyone I knew who possessed such a strong Irish background and pride in his heritage. My guess is, although we never really discussed it, that from very early on in his career he gravitated towards the idea of heading up what we then called The Law School, and that he was confident he possessed the creativity to develop it into something which could gain the respect of the profession, not just provincially, but in the wider sphere of legal education. So while essentially cautious by nature, he kept his “cool” in troublesome times, did not give up in despair when improvements and change failed to produce the hoped for increase in numbers of students, and instead tackled the major problem head on – that of the Law Faculty being located in Saint John, detached from the main campus in Fredericton.

Those first three years as Dean, 1956-59, were a difficult period, high in hope and yet low in enrollment with total numbers running at twenty-four, twenty-eight and twenty-five. Professor David Bell has shown me an interesting letter written by Dean Cecil Wright of the University of Toronto, in response to a communication from Bill Ryan concerning his future prospects wherein Ryan had sought advice from a more senior colleague. Dated 16 February 1956, after Ryan had been offered the Deanship at the Law School, Wright points out the potential for problems with Bill's colleague and friend, Professor George McAllister. As Wright phrased it, “I should imagine that the decisive factor would really be the feelings of George and the question of your future relations. Personally I think the University authorities need to be faced with a good stiff jolt in view of their shilly-shallying.” He then goes on to say; “As I told you last year, I feel that eventually you will probably end up at a school such as ours. At the moment, however, I must be frank and state that the prospects here are not good.” Further along he makes this point: “the other alternative is, as you say, going into practice. I, personally, would not like to see you do this since good men in the teaching field are rare and I would hate to think that the stupidities at New Brunswick had deprived the teaching profession of the services of a person such as yourself.”

From my memory of those events, I am convinced Bill would have accepted the offer even if Dean Wright had advised against such a course of action. Bill wanted it and sensed, correctly as it turned out, that he could continue to have good relations with George McAllister. This was the opportunity to set this faculty on a new course and give it a direction which would soon attract increasing numbers of students.

During that period we did not see as much of each other as I would have wished, since developments in Fredericton kept me busy there, which meant our first full-time Dean was pretty much on his own in Saint John promoting this important sector of university activity. Bill had lots of ideas and was adept at developing plans, but I sensed there were periods of considerable frustration in not having the enthusiastic backing of the Board and President to ensure quick action

was being taken to carry them out. So, when the third year in a row saw little change in the numbers of students he decided, or at least maintained, that he had enough of this job. I do not believe that he had any intention of leaving, but he was determined to have his Faculty of Law moved to Fredericton. In this matter we were in complete agreement. In fact, when looking back over those years of our university association there was never an occasion of any fundamental disagreement between us in relation to the development of the Faculty of Law. His ultimate goal was to lead a Law School which would be recognized and respected, as much for the calibre of its graduates as by the quality of instruction in its classrooms.

With the move to Fredericton, Dean Ryan began to play an active role in many areas of activity. He was an excellent sounding board for the President on differences and difficulties of a university-wide nature, and soon proved to be a most effective member of the Board of Deans in its almost weekly deliberations. One instance in which he played a behind-the-scene role was in the setting up of the Royal Commission on higher education which successfully rationalized and set the pattern for the future development of universities in this province. Today, it is generally recognized that the key to the success of this venture was in the direction given to it by the Chairman, Dr. John Deutsch. It was Dean Ryan who put forward his name as the person to handle this most important assignment. The fact that the report was eagerly accepted and acted upon by Government is an indication of the respect in which the Dean of Law was held by its members.

Bill Ryan never rushed in to confront a problem, but rather always adopted a step by step approach in attempting to find a solution. The success that he had in moving his faculty from Saint John to Fredericton, then quickly integrating it with other areas of activity "Up the Hill" was the mark of his accomplishment. The first such attempt, undertaken with insufficient planning and without strong conviction, had ended in failure. Dean Ryan was determined that this would not happen again.

It may be that when he was first appointed to a teaching post there were those who imagined this to be the limit of his ambitions, and they failed to detect within Ryan the desire for change – a desire which made it possible for a small law school to play a leading role in the life at UNB. His career was not to lead but to follow, so they thought. How wrong they were who made that assumption. Instead, he proved to be extremely ambitious. He knew he could lead effectively (as he had done as a student), and he was confident that he could lead his colleagues towards his desired goals. To refer once again to the letter from Dean Wright where he states; "I find it difficult, certainly from this distance, to understand the refusal to appoint George. The fact that you have now been offered the Deanship certainly places you in an extremely difficult position and you have all my sympathy." It would seem that from a Toronto viewpoint, George McAllister, being the more senior of the two, should have been given this position.

Moreover, since the university had failed to proceed in that way, it would be unwise of Bill to take the plunge. (It is not difficult to read into this letter a feeling that Bill was not ready for such an assignment.) But dive in Bill did, to achieve remarkable success and, in due course, to be succeeded as Dean by George McAllister.

Did Dean Ryan have a sense of humor? There are some who would say "No", but I believe that he did. Not the loud, noisy, backslapping kind, but more of a sensitive and subtle touch. Bill had the proper sense of proportion in his dealings with others, always a prerequisite for a keen sense of humour.

His years as head of the Faculty of Law provided ample scope for him to sharpen his administrative and judicial talents, which then were exercised for the greater good on the Ottawa scene in the Federal Court. Always a most reasonable, helpful and accommodating colleague, nevertheless, one could not maintain that he suffered fools gladly. There were many occasions when such individuals could rouse him to anger, but provided people were prepared to play the game "straight" then he would do his best not to display impatience and he never showed contempt for others. It was when generally and gentlemanly accepted procedures were not followed that he could become both brief in speech and short in temper.

Recently I read in *The New Yorker* magazine a tribute to the Honourable J. William Fulbright, a distinguished honorary graduate of this University. In it the author, Sidney Blumenthal, makes this comment; "Fulbright's great dissents were expressions of his disdain for the irrational. In 1954, he was the sole senator to vote against funding Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunting committee, and he instigated the Senate's condemnation of McCarthy." Dean Ryan was always fascinated and sometimes appalled by the political process. I feel certain that had he been in a spot similar to that occupied by Senator Fulbright, our "democratic Dean" would without any hesitation have stood alone in such a situation. He did his utmost to ensure that his conscience was always clear, and in all of his dealings with colleagues and adversaries, with students and with friends, he came closer than most of us in approaching this ideal.