

## G. Fred McNally's Account of the Aberhart Honorary Degree Reversal

Before reporting on this election I wish to recount a strange event which took place a few years before. The survey committee referred to above had been set up after an incident which I still blush to remember. It had become the practice of the university to confer an honorary degree on the Premier after his second successful appeal to the electorate. Mr. Aberhart had been re-elected for his second term in 1939. President Kerr had sounded out what he thought to be a majority of the Senate as well as all of his Deans. All seemed to be agreeable. Mr. Aberhart had been pleased to accept the honor and agreed to give the Convocation address. It was customary in those days for the Senate to meet the day before the Spring Convocation to hear a report from the President and to approve the recommendations for honorary degrees. In 1941 the Senate met as usual, with Mr. Justice Parlee, chairman of the Board of Governors, presiding. Dr. Rutherford, the Chancellor, was unable to attend because of failing health. When the President announced the nomination of Mr. Aberhart for the degree, opposition immediately became evident. The matter was discussed throughout the entire morning. I urged the

acceptance of the report not only on the ground that Mr. Aberhart had done nothing to deserve such an affront but because of the effect the rejection would have on the attitude of the government, on whose support the university must depend. At last, just before noon adjournment, a vote was taken and the rejection of the report carried by a small majority. The chairman found some reason for re-opening the question after lunch and again a vote was taken; this time the majority was reduced to three. Several of those who had voted against the rejection, such as the deputy minister of health, thinking that the matter had been settled, had not returned for the afternoon session. Had they been in their places, we should have been spared this second humiliation. President Kerr felt that he had been betrayed by his people and presented his resignation.

I had been selected to report the action of the Senate to the Premier. He took the news quite calmly, merely asking if I thought those who spoke and voted against him did it by way of political reprisal. My answer was, "Nothing had been said against him as being unworthy of the honor, but extreme bitterness had been shown with regard to his political policies." He said that of course he

could not under the circumstances appear at Convocation, and I was to so advise the President. On the following morning the Chairman of the Board of Governors and the President waited on the Premier to present their regrets and apologies. He received them with dignity and said I had assured him that both of them had done everything in their power to secure the Senate's approval. Of course the members of the government reacted as I had expected, and many suggestions for hostile action against the university were heard. However, no reprisals were actually carried out. I regard this as the most disgraceful episode in the history of the university.

After the incident just described, the government felt that the whole matter of university management as well as its general policies should be looked into. Accordingly, a survey committee consisting of the Chairman of the Board of Governors, the President of the university, the Deputy Minister of Education, the Supervisor of Schools, the Secretary of the Alberta Teachers' Association, and a businessman, Mr. Francis G. Winspear, was appointed. The committee met very often during the summer and fall of 1941. Dr. Newton acted as secretary and wrote the report. Every phase of uni-

versity life was reviewed, and with surprising unanimity the committee produced a report recommending a new University Act. The government had a new bill drafted along the lines suggested, and this was piloted through the legislature by the Premier as Minister of Education.

The main changes in the new University Act were: the powers of the Senate were curtailed, a specific term was set for the Chancellor, and the responsibility for recommendations for degrees in course was vested in the General Faculty Council, as were changes in the programs of studies. This gave much more power to the General Faculty Council, which before had been largely a debating organization with final action residing in the Senate. The matter of deciding who should receive honorary degrees was left to the Senate, largely because no one could think of any other body in which this important function might be vested. Under the new legislation, the Senate performs a useful function as a public relations body.

