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তারিখ ... 15/5/78 ...
পৃষ্ঠা ... 5 ... কলাম ... 3 ...

Bradford University's first Vice-Chancellor has just retired. Christopher Griffin-Beale talks to Dr E. G. Edwards whose efforts to find a human face for a technological world resulted in academic innovations which received wide acclaim

Introducing the human factor

Dr Edwards

In the twelve years since its transformation from a college of advanced technology, Bradford University has had its share of recognition, sometimes for industrial and technological relevance, sometimes for outstanding academic innovations such as Peace Studies. But there has been little comparable public acclaim for Dr E.G. Edwards, its first Vice-Chancellor who retired last week.

Although Edwards may not be a nationally-known figure like some of his counterparts, he is probably better known to his own students than any of them. Bradford students were often surprised to discover the stocky, affable Welshman drinking at their bar, or joining the university rugby team on its coach-away matches. This reflected his sympathy with students but never diminished his authority. A colleague once described him as "a chemist by training but a Vice-Chancellor by inclination. His nickname Red Ted is both affectionate and historically accurate. He joined the Communist Party in the late thirties when it seemed to him the only organisation taking a stand against Fascism, was active in the Science for Peace group with Bernal, and lingered until 1956.

He shared the furious indignation of youth. His father was a militant shipwright in the days when you had to pay the foreman a week's wages to get work. His father refused but achieved the same effect by holding a foreman over the side of a ship.

Edwards volunteered to fight in Spain with the International Brigade; but was not sent: he neither had military training nor, then a party card. He won a scholarship to grammar school and went on to Cardiff College of Technology rather than university which he associated with his sixth form and its aping of the public school. In addition the college had an inspiring chemistry teacher, academically far more distinguished than his Cardiff university counterparts. Edwards eventually took external London degrees, including a PhD.

By the time war came, he was a lecturer at Nottingham University. After war-work with ICI he was encouraged to stay, even though his politics were deplored. But the offer of a departmental headship at the Royal Technical College in Salford which has since paralleled Bradford's development into a college of advanced technology and then university, was too good to turn down at the age of 30. However teaching commitments for most of a decade had left him insufficient research time to keep up in his subject and he decided to move over into administration. After three years as a principal in Liverpool, he became principal at Bradford when it became a college of advanced technology in 1957.

Bradford's transition into a university extended the approach Edwards had already been encouraging. For a technological university relevance could simply imply a close correlation between theory and practice in its courses: indeed 80 per cent of its undergraduates, even some of those studying literature, are on some kind of sandwich course. But Edwards has strived for courses that confront students with the indications as well as the applications of their discipline and this involves far more than technology.

Edwards insisted upon a novel, but crucial addition to the conventional aim in the university's charter "the advancement of learning and knowledge" — "the application of knowledge to human welfare." And when you ask him what he is most proud of at Bradford, it is the university's attempts to give a human face to a technological world. Indeed he reckons that the university's course in the applied humanities may prove the most relevant of its contributions.

Peace Studies, Bradford's most celebrated innovation, sprang from an initiative by the Quakers — the pro Vice-Chancellor, Robert MacKinlay is himself a Quaker — and it has Edwards' fervent support.

Edwards considers Peace Studies as practical as engineering. "People have to agree together to co-operate, otherwise the fight, and they can never agree unless they accept they are equally important. Peace Studies is about what helps or hinders people to agree."

As technology becomes more complex, it involves an increasing proportion of social science given the human and social problems it poses. He believes industrial failures at British Leyland or Rolls-Royce have little to do with engineering, but are caused by management and human relation problems. He is delighted that engineers on the operations management course voluntarily asked for moral philosophy seminars "not as some kind of cultural garnish, but as a practical part of their training." But such an emphasis does not merely make graduates more socially aware: they are more employable too. Graduates on the industrial technology course, which involves 40 per cent social science, are getting better jobs than the university's engineering graduates, although generally Bradford graduates fare well with only half the national average for graduate unemployment.

Edwards has trenchant views about the Humanities. He deplores the academic "voyeurism" of some literary or historical studies, attemptin gto study literature without an idea on how culture affects (or doesn't affect) people "or talking about Tolstoy who depicts great social changes when you have no intention of participating in any such changes yourself." A new four-year sandwich course in Interdisciplinary Human Studies involves sociology, philosophy literature and social psychology.

Such clear, and controversial policies inevitably provoked some academic opposition which Edwards combatted — as with uncompromising determination and sophisticated political skill. One senior colleague said a political scientist would give him few marks, for he pushed ahead without always waiting for a consensus of academic opinion, but a management expert would give him very high marks as an academic entrepreneur who gets things done.

Ironically, this authoritarian streak was reserved for faculty, students found him an unusually conciliatory, considerate negotiator. Past Presidents of the students' union remember him with unusually uniform respect and affections.

Underlying all this was the conviction that students and faculty were equally important. He recognised the need not to neglect students academically, the "poisonous" effects of an over-reliance upon the lecture system, which detracted from the direct contact between student and tutor, "the guts of the business." In student politics, he further confounded conventional expectations in 1969 when the student president "demanded" that students have three places on senate. "But I was proposing to offer you nine," Edwards replied. He advocated student participation long before other vice-chancellers were prepared, grudingly, to concede it, even under duress.

He inserted a revolutionary clause in the draft charter, offering a student place on the university council. Warned that The University Grants Committee would never allow it, the chairman of the college management committee asked what UGC was. When Edwards explained it was London-based, the chairman said, "London won't dictate to Bradford" and insisted the clause remain, even though it delayed the charter's acceptance by some months and and only allowed a nine explicit understanding that it did create a national precedent.

Bradford's lone stand over a decade against the raising of overseas student fees is further confirmation of Edwards's political will and skill. The policy he opposes was first introduced in 1967 by the Government whose Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, was the university's Chancellor.

When the University Council was warned it should not contradict national policy, Edwards reminded them that they alone had the ultimate responsibility for determining Bradford fees. They supported him then and still do at a current cost of 100,000 pound though this is only one per cent of the university's income.

Bradford has steadfastly charged no fees for overseas students, even though British students. (He deplores the charging of any fees but that is too big an issue for Bradford to tackle unilaterally) and Edwards sees it as an issue of principle, threatening the international free-trade in ideas upon which universities depend. But "moral principles are intensely practical things." Foreign research students, he argues, will naturally tend to favour the national industry they know when subsequently placing export orders.

He believes the practical value of universities is neither sufficiently appreciated nor exploited and in retirement he will write a book about the future of universities.

His research shows that, despite Robbins and other indigenous policies, England has followed the same pattern of expansion as other Western countries throughout this century ... except that it has remained several decades behind them in the percentage of its age-group in higher education. He argues for positive action to encourage further university expansion and create a "high demand high supply" economy in higher education, coupled with reforms in universities and with an economic policy guaranteeing jobs for the new graduates.

Alongside his statistical arguments, Edwards will also attend to the philosophical discussion about the relationship between knowledge and values. And so in retirement he will continue the synthesis between practice and principle he nurtured in 21 years at Bradford.

He amplified his emphasis upon the "applied humanities" when he gave a farewell address to University Court. "A solution of the technical and economic problems that face us, unless it is penetrated and illuminated by a vision of justice, of the quality of human life, of an end to the nuclear terror that overhangs us all, would not merely be immoral it would be practical nonsense. A single surge of social unrest can destroy the technical and economic achievements of many generations. We have to find a human face for a technological world."