

Laurentian University Crisis

Philip J. Regal

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Friends,

Government has very badly treated Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario. Indeed government has treated very badly the entire vast region that Laurentian served. A financial crisis was declared in February 2021 and massive precipitous firings and program eliminations followed. Both faculty and students were not only abused by the massive abrupt firings and program closures but were treated with shocking insensitivity and imperiousness.

A great deal was written back in 2021 and I won't repeat the details because they seem to be well known. (Sources are easily found on the Internet.¹) Rather I am sketching some of my personal thoughts and continuing questions. I will share them.

To begin with, even though a great deal has been written, I find that even the media discussion has been less than adequate. There should have been more hard-nosed investigative reporting and digging into the facts about this important issue. Though readers might dig out some important details from scattered sources I do not see the focused investigative journalism and comprehensive media analysis that is deserved. So I am disappointed with both government and media treatment.

My strong reaction is not only because of the bizarre details of the ways in which over two hundred faculty were suddenly fired, whole programs eliminated, students treated while involved in coursework, and how the government and administration have fought to keep even the budget information secret while making broad arm-waving claims about their financial motives. Well beyond budgets and even the abuse of students and faculty there are larger issues about higher education at stake.

My reaction is also coloured by perspectives that trace to my own experiences going back to growing up in California. That is where I began to develop my thoughts about what should higher education be and how should it serve individuals and society.

California had already started to develop a good coordinated system of 2-year level degree granting community colleges, 4-year and master's level state colleges, and PhD level universities by the time I graduated from high school in 1957. There was a master plan concept to make higher education available as much as possible to citizens throughout the state. The rate of implementation may have been constrained by local economic feasibility but the concept was widely accepted and was being pushed forward diligently by California communities.

The concept was to provide higher education in both liberal arts and the more professional practical areas. California wanted citizens that were as well rounded and educated as individual motivations and abilities directed them to be. It wanted individual citizens that could develop their full potential. It was in a sense

¹ Here is one, but no one answers all the questions that should be asked.
<https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/the-fix-inside-laurentian-universitys-demise> Anyone interested will seek more.

simply the American dream of a new land of freedom and opportunity that would be made into a reality. Well-educated citizens would have richer lives, be more enlightened citizens, and contribute to making the overall society better.

The idea was to attract and cultivate from everywhere people with high standards with regard to quality of life and cultural and technical creativity. The seeds of these ideals were already present for example with the diverse talents required by the film and aerospace industries, and even innovations in agriculture because of the diversity of climates. It takes educated people to figure out how to make good societies as well as to support cutting edge industries.

Our teachers hyped education, I confess. They told us to compare our opportunities in California to the Southern States and mining belts, hill country, and big Eastern city slums. Pay attention to how poorly educated people live. Notice how limited their lives are and dreams can be. California intended to leave all that behind. "Golden State" would mean more than the ore in the mountains or tanned bodies. Once one starts looking at things in this progressive way it is hard to shake the insights into life that open up.

Not everyone thought this way. I met people for example from well-healed families that called public education socialism. I heard, "We pay to send our kids to private schools, why should we also have to pay for the education of kids that will be competing with our kids?" They were in the minority however all through my own education. But their voices only became stronger around the mid and late 1960s and in part because of reactions against students that resisted the draft and parental authority, and opposed the Vietnamese War. Their factions could now argue that publically funded liberal education was even a threat to the power structures. These kids they said would bit the hand that feeds them. They wanted to reap the benefits of capitalism but would not put on a uniform to defend it.

I missed a lot of the fight that was going on in California after I took a job as a professor at the University of Minnesota in 1970. That fight, especially with UC Berkeley had a lot to do with launching Ronald Reagan as Governor and gave him a chance to look tough on cracking down on the University of California. In part that tough guy image helped him become President and with his counterpart the Iron Lady and lead the world into a new era. They began perhaps most famously by showing toughness against organized labour on both sides of the Atlantic.²

Minnesota was one of the few states that had also had a rather advanced concept of higher education and that was still largely afloat when I took the job in 1970. A lot of the reason that Minnesotans had this progressive attitude had to do with its founding by Scandinavian immigrants that had brought their democratic traditions and social aspirations with them to their new land. Their vision of a New

² A friend gave me a dense 576-page report by the National Union of Mineworkers on the condition of mineworkers when they were under attack by the Thatcher government. I confess that I only browsed it, but I was impressed at how organized and reflective they were. The Lido, Hotel de France, St. Helier, Jersey, Channel Islands. 6 July 1981. Secretary L. Daly. President J. Gormley. I wonder if there have been extensive reviews of the mining industry in Canada from the perspective of labour.

Word had built a fine society of relatively well-educated people and well organized Minnesota communities with excellent parks and museums, theatre, films, and the other arts in which Minnesotans could take pride and live comfortably. Minnesota health care was tops. Major corporations had their headquarters there in part because they could offer executives quality living conditions, smart employees, and institutions that could support their needs for ongoing training and development.

Utopias only exist as straw men, and neither California nor Minnesota even in those days was a utopia. It was a no brainer to see however that high respect for the concept of a well educated population had very much helped offset the brutal winters and tornados and had made Minnesota an attractive place to live and be creative and enterprising.

What does all this have to do with Sudbury and Laurentian University?

I retired from the University of Minnesota and for various reasons soon resettled in Toronto in 2009 to become a Canadian citizen. Toronto had much to offer culturally and in terms of good libraries so that I could continue with research interests and writing.

I had already started to try to get to know Canada before deciding to move to Toronto and was familiar with many of the very positive aspects of Canadian society and much of Canadian history. I still had a lot to pick up however about how “the country actually runs.” Where is the power and how does it flow through and help structure the system and influence cultural attitudes and decision-making -- and how in the end power influences the shape of society.

I pondered for one thing the distribution of population across the map. Canada is simply enormous, yet the population is highly concentrated in a few cities and the strip along the Great Lakes in the very south of Ontario, and then along the St. Lawrence in Southern Quebec.

One heard that Canada was determined to spread out the population better and make better use of its vast lands, and relieve the congestion along Lake Ontario. Indeed there were even problems getting good health care out beyond the limited metropolitan areas.

While one commonly heard the sentiment to populate “the hinterlands” and it seemed completely logical, one saw little effort and mostly arm-waving. It would not even surprise me if every government department had some (arm-waving?) office they could point to that was working at this -- and yet one did not see indications of significant results or even of priority and action. Governments everywhere do set up programs to “show that they care” and that they are working to serve across the political spectrum, but to which they do not give priority, and so programs do not in and of themselves prove much.

Bureaucracies are always problematic whether they are socialist or capitalist, corporate or government, university, union, or civic. This is because of internal dynamics and also because their internal power sociology must play games with external powers in order to function. Mixed in here are matters of economics. Economics are always for agencies matters of priority. Canada’s government can find the money to help the Ukrainian people in a crisis but not its own people in

Sudbury and the areas of Northern Ontario. Let's say each fighter jet costs 60-80 million dollars out of the box and before servicing etc. There are humanitarian issues in both cases, but the planes will get some priority for obvious reasons but also less conspicuously because Big Business is in there pushing for contracts and using its political leverage, and the military can see their advantage in this. Miners, indigenous people, and rural Ontarians have less access and leverage.

In any event ... what seemed to be a lack of priority to develop the incredibly vast land of Northern Ontario was very puzzling and seemed like a conspicuous and grand inefficiency – considering where I was coming from and what had been done with Minnesota despite its difficult climate.

So I came to the matter of Sudbury and Laurentian with lots of questions, as well as with the background that I have mentioned from cultures where higher education was highly valued in terms of overall quality of life, respect for individual potentials, and of course its many economic benefits.

There are many things a person should know to understand why something that might seem logical has not been playing out logically. Often it is because there are other logics at work and conflicts of interest!

Likewise what should one understand to begin to see how to help the people of Northern Ontario make better lives for themselves?

I ruminated over the history of Canada in the search for understanding. I did not come up with solid answers, but it would be intellectually irresponsible to ignore possible historical contributions that were staring me in the face. We need likely hypotheses to consider as we navigate life.

I ruminated over the fact that Canada remained a collection of British colonies even into the 20th century. Commonwealth ties remain as a significant vestige of colonialism today in fact.

Europeans did little to elevate the quality of life in most of their colonies. One could argue about India where there was significant development, but India also certainly paid some serious prices and it cost them much of what had been their treasure. And it had a spectacular civilization to begin with. Most of the colonies however were simply managed to provide raw materials for European industries and trade. There was not much other wealth to take from most of them.

British interests in what has become Canada were dominated by interests in its natural resources; and by geopolitical importance with regard for example to French, Russian, and eventually United States expansionist and trade ambitions.

Indigenous people were British trading partners and allies in wars for a while and then eventually became competitors and obstacles to land use by investors and the settlers needed to extract the natural resources. Any efforts that might pass as improving their lives had to take the form of assimilation into and subordination by The System if not brutal elimination, but would certainly not be on their own terms.

Basically the First Peoples would not be helped in ways that might interfere with present or future plans to extract the natural resources at the lowest costs. Among the institutions set up to “help the Amerindians” were the now notorious

residential schools. There should be no need to belabour that tragic history, for it is now topical.

The agendas of the European ruling classes of tradesmen, bankers, and old nobility sponsor economic enterprises, governing institutions, education and friendly religious factions that create cultures of attitudes and patterns of life that will support their interests. This was necessarily true as areas of the world were colonized.

Colonial cultures tend to become self-sustaining presuming that they can continue to serve their functions. Even “the cogs in the wheels” lower down in the power structure will defend the colonialist cultural perspectives and institutions because “at least they work” -- and even the lower levels people see security within them and try to view them optimistically as possible even if they grumble.

US Americans tend not to understand their own country’s transition from a collection of colonies to a global colonialist power despite two centuries of debate about this. So it would not be surprising if citizens of a much younger Canada would not usually be thinking of their cultural and economic legacies from even more recent colonial domination.

Among Canada’s important natural resources that are being exported there is mining. Canadians would often tell me that the future of Canada was in mining because we have enormous potential mineral reserves but cannot really compete industrially with the United States or Britain. So I realized soon after immigrating to Canada that I would have to keep my eyes open with regard to mining if I was going to understand the country. Given the greater task of just getting settled in a new country, and dealing with health issues, I can’t say that I actually studied mining, as one should. But I did try to keep my eyes open.

For one thing Canada has been invested in mining to an astonishing degree. I have seen it even in little people that follow the mining penny stocks, but also in the largest institutional investors. It seems that institutional and personal investments in mining stocks are enormous and perhaps a disproportionate percentage of the way institutions distribute their investments. The political implications of this must be highly consequential, but I did not notice that this was being discussed in such terms in the media or conversation. I wonder how aware most Canadians are of how much Canada is invested in mining. So here is an area for serious study. There would necessarily be many dimensions to investigate.

One curious dimension is that many mining companies are foreign or at least multinational. They are Canadian largely in name only. Apparently Canadian laws make this a good place for mining companies to have a mailbox and a lawfirm. So I would have questions about the political influence of foreign and multinational companies for Canadian citizens and culture.

That would get us for example back around to how much interest mine owners and speculator might have in improving the quality of life for people in small mining city such as Sudbury or for that matter the whole of Northern Ontario, that consists of even smaller towns and Indigenous People’s lands. If mine owners conform to the common pattern for other countries for example in Latin America,

Africa, Asia, and even in the United States their interest would be largely in maintaining a supply of low-cost manual and technical labour.

It might be comforting to think of the mining companies registered in Canada as “our mining companies” but that does not mean that they see it the same way and that Canadians can simply assume that the industry has sincere humanitarian sympathies and community loyalties. Working away within Canadian culture there may be some consciousness about these things that is false.

Would mining companies in any event be genuinely civic even if they were 100% Canadian? The history of US coal, iron, copper, etc. mining companies has been disgustingly bad in this respect for example. Workers have been expendable and the priority has been to keep down working costs, including wages.

One thing I did in regard to an interest in Canadian history and mining turned out to be so charming and I can't resist mentioning it. Soon after immigrating to Canada I picked up a set of DVD's to a 1999 CBC television series, **Pit Pony** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pit_Pony_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pit_Pony_(TV_series)). It is a family or even children's perspective story about growing up in a mining family/community in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. It gently but rather brilliantly shows how the children are indoctrinated into the manly virtues that miners need to work under relentlessly brutal and hazardous conditions. The local schoolteacher is fighting an uphill battle to broaden their horizons. She has to deal with the socially conditioned mentalities and values of the children and their families.

There was child labour in those days and because kids and ponies were small the company did not have to make the tunnels so large and so it was cheaper to dig them. When I finally got to go down into those very mines I had to stoop so very much that it was really difficult. My old-timer miner guide told me that the men simply had to get used to it. Lifetimes were spent this way. And of course mines are dangerous in terms of accidents, etc. So you teach your son to be manly and proud to be brave.

I really liked that program and was sorry that it had been cancelled and was not run for more seasons. Where they might have taken it? It was rich with possibilities.

I don't remember much about an earlier film **How Green Was My Valley** about a mining community in Wales. **Pit Pony** seemed somehow deeper for me in terms of getting into the upbringing angle and emotional issues, even though it was less dramatic. Again the film **Matewan** about a miner's strike is very good but also dramatic and not so much about psychological exploitation of miners as it is political and economic in more familiar terms. I also thought **Blood Diamond** was very good and as I recall there were especially good special features about diamond mining in Africa on the DVD.

In any event – **Pit Pony** aside -- the effective promotion of liberal education for mining communities would be very unusual anywhere in the world. It could be working against the interests of the economic powers, and against the interests of families to keep their kids from leaving home for greener pastures.

Also in any event -- the exploitation of miners and mining communities has never been a secret. The cultural/psychological mechanics of exploitation however can be subtle and difficult for one to see past the veneer of specific "incidents" such as mining accidents and strikes. These mechanics require more sophistication with regard to understanding the relationships of economics and culture with regard to consciousness, and for example the role of education that is narrow versus education that has the potential to be broadening.

I must add to this discussion the fact that "globalization" has accelerated and developed a very conscious ideology especially since World War II. Rapid communications, rapid mass transportation, and technological innovations were clearly shrinking the world at a rapid rate. Their literature indicates a keen awareness that we were entering a new future in this regard and that they had to get ahead of the game not only with regard to their own business operations but with regard to lobbying for laws and government programs, including education.

The old nationalism and democratic aspirations of self-rule and quality of life were presenting what Big Money saw as trade barriers; and antitrust efforts were seen as obstacles to capitalizing on the potentials for economy of scale and diversification of corporations into conglomerates.

Where effective organized labour existed, it was seen as a force to keep wages too high. In several ways organized labour would be a barrier to profits. This would include being a barrier to exploiting the full potentials of outsourcing to make profits. (There used to be when I was young "the union label" on items, and even a song! <https://www.nyhistory.org/blogs/look-for-the-union-label> It seems a long time since I have seen one.)

The literature that was aimed to help business and Big Money prepare for an increasing globalized economy was and is quite extensive. Yet it and the agenda reflected in it are seldom referred to in the mass media.

Basically, true democracy was and is standing in the way of globalization. When people organize they may well get to discussing standard of living issues and these can include quality of life issues. They may get concerned about labour conditions and education and pollution and so on. Small businesses may smile that quality of life is wonderful, so long as employees don't demand higher wages. Back in the big boardrooms however democracy and quality of life issues can look like a storm brewing – looming regulations and demands for wage increases that can fall under the catchword of "trade barriers." This means barriers to *laissez faire*. They say in meetings etc., "We just want a level playing field on which to compete."

The globalization literature includes discussions that education must be redesigned to serve the new global powers. For higher education in particular – for universities this include a redirection of resources and brainpower to programs that will stimulate the economy.

There are also suggestions that "liberalism" on campuses should be eliminated because allegedly "liberals" would have people bite the hand that feeds all us. A union person might say that this argument is far too simple, because

corporate executives are not shy about biting the hands of the labourers that feed them.

Let me now leave behind issues about how Canada should go about distributing its population, and economic policies and such. I brought all this up to give some personal background perspective on why a retired professor living in a Toronto condominium would have been pondering what life was like and might instead be like out in “the Canadian hinterlands” -- and to explain one of the reasons that I had some interest in mining in particular.

A few years ago I drove up to Sudbury to see what it was like, and frankly I hoped there would be a really top mining museum considering the importance of mining to Northern Ontario, and indeed all of Canada. I have been to some very nice mining museums, including one at Glace Bay for the mines on which **Pit Pony** was based. Those particular mines became economically unviable and were closed, but the community built a fine museum and you can even go down into the old mines.

Visiting Sudbury, I thought that considering mining was vital to the future of the area and indeed of Canada I might find good meaty displays on Canadian geology – covering rock formations and minerals and mineral reserves in a truly informative manner.

I did not find much reason to spend much time in Sudbury museums back on that visit. I still need to go back and give it another try. Anyway, the fact that they were thin on content that would interest me that left me with time to look around the town. It did not come across as the thriving hub of an economically important part of the country.

I was told however that because Ottawa and Queen’s Park (the Ontario provincial government capital building in Toronto) had neglected Sudbury, the people had taken it on themselves to pitch in and were in fact developing vibrant community with theatre and arts etc. It was not necessarily visible to visitors however.

The next chapter in the story was that programs at Laurentian had become integral to those efforts of the people of Sudbury and the general area to bootstrap culturally. Laurentian programs provided diverse coursework opportunities, opportunities for diverse people to meet and network. Graduate level programs provided people opportunities to develop advanced research skills that in turn offered opportunities to research regional history, economics, ecology, and sociology and develop greater insights that could not only improve their sense of identity, but allow them to intelligently plan for a better future for a vast and multicultural part of Canada.

These were things that I had seen to be helpful for development and the quality of life in both California and Minnesota. So that clicked for me.

This was all very heart warming to hear. So back in Toronto I had been feeling hopeful for Sudbury’s future.

Sad to say however, I was feeling hopeful without understanding how much more there might be to the political context in which progress seemed to be taking place.

I did not return to thinking about Sudbury until about a year after the Laurentian University crisis actually broke (back in February 2021). Personal health issues had preoccupied me, the general turmoil in the world, and simply coping with the pandemic. So on the plus side of my ignorance there was now a year of history to draw upon in scattered publications.

During that year it had become obvious that the efforts of those responsible for the disaster to avoid transparency and accountability would be relentless. This in and of itself was exceedingly suspicious. Although decisions were not-surprisingly articulated as economic matters, even the books on how public money had been spent were actively being kept closed!! What was there to hide from the public?

All the important facts about how the fate of a public university and a community of Canadian citizens and a huge region were being determined were not above board by any means. This was not how democracy should work.

Was it the case that by some legacy of thinking there was a de facto attitude or policy to keep the quality of life aspirations for much of Ontario contained? Would even efforts to bootstrap be disregarded or even actively undermined? This would be a matter that should disturb all Canadians, but especially those living outside of the major southern cities. Was their fate in a certain sense being politically predetermined?

Need I add that as an educator I was not only concerned about civic matters as such? I was certainly concerned about the implications for the philosophy of education and for the integrity of education as a vocation and as an institutional matter. What were politics doing to education and to research institutions in Canada?

I did not run across much useful literature about Canadian universities in particular. But, **Academia, Inc.: How Corporatization Is Transforming Canadian Universities** by Jamie Brownlee <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/academia-inc/9781552667354> looks good to me and is consistent with what I know very well has been going on in the United States and elsewhere in our world that global capital has been rebuilding.

I should add that I was not naïve about the fact that academic freedoms as well as anything like self-rule at universities broadly speaking has been under attack for many years. This was true way back when I was growing up in California and then at the University of Minnesota. I know the situation for the United States best.

Academic freedom per se has always been under some level of attack. It has been extensively discussed however that programmatic control of American universities has been seen to be a high priority especially because of World War II. In part this is because they have been seen to be critical resources with regard to a

spectrum of national security needs ranging from technology to economic strength and trade.

(Then as I alluded to above, with the ascendancy of multinationals and global capital the distinctions between national and multinational become an ongoing semantic and de facto shell game that is difficult to bring to life in a few words.)

It seems fair to suspect that the broader forces at work to control universities might well be part of the equation for the situation at Laurentian. I may or may not get back to this. It is a very large topic that can be approached from several angles, and I have already written a great deal about the broader issues elsewhere. (One I see is again available on the web. "The Brain and the University: Survival with Two Imperfect Organs" <https://americanhumanist.org/humanismtoday/vol11/regal/>)

The above sketches my general orientation on this. It is best to end this now because I don't yet know enough about the details to understand as well as I would like important obscured details what is going on with Laurentian, with Sudbury and the region, and indeed with higher education in Canada in general.

Do any of us know enough? All Canadians and those anywhere with a serious interest in education and social justice deserve to know how decisions are made both mechanically and also ideologically.

Are Laurentian and Sudbury caught in a trap of old colonial-based attitudes about how Ontario and its "hinterlands" should be managed? Are the people of the region the victims of political string pulling that involve old management approaches to mining communities? Could this simply have been a colossal blunder specifically on the part of those entrusted to manage the university? This last does not add up well for me.

I will try to keep my eyes open.

I am a retired old fellow however and what really matters is that others with more energy left and able to imagine their own lives and of course their children's lives farther into the future keep their eyes open! I hope that they will give this matter the attention that it deserves.

The fate and future of so many Canadians should not be left to backroom politics and lazy journalism. How much of the problem is that timid journalism has not hammered its way beneath the surface and turns politely away from the procedural curtains that have been draped over the important facts that we need to know?

Philip Regal is Professor of Biology, retired from the University of Minnesota where he conducted basic biological research and taught biology. Professor Regal was deeply involved over several decades in the development of United States Government and international science policies. Reflecting moreover his interests in education, he served as a member of the Technology Panel of Phase I of the twelve year project of the American Association for the Advancement of Science to develop a plan to revise public science education in anticipation of the imposing challenges that the future promises -- "**Project 2061: Science for All. Americans**" — and was a consultant to Phase II. He is the author of **The Anatomy of Judgment**.