

FACULTY FOCUS:

HOWARD PETCH AND THE PETCH PROCEDURES

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On behalf of the Faculty Association I would like to acknowledge the recent passing of a much-esteemed former president of UVic, Howard Petch. For academic staff at UVic, Dr. Petch's name will forever be linked to what we still call the "Petch procedures"- what Peter Smith, a historian of UVic, called: "one of the most significant innovations of Petch's presidency... [and] one of Howard's finest legacies to UVic." The procedures require that faculty members ratify administrators, with 60 per cent acceptance required among those voting in the relevant unit. As Professors Eric Sager and Doug Baer discuss in more detail in the following pieces, these procedures appear to be unique to UVic among Canadian universities, and continue to serve as a crucial cornerstone of collegial governance at this university. We acknowledge with respect and gratitude Dr. Petch's contribution to UVic. The Faculty Association of the 1970s worked with Dr. Petch to bring in these procedures, and we remain committed to maintaining them as we work to keep the voice of faculty members in collegial governance at UVic. ■



*Howard Petch
President of the University of Victoria from 1975 to 1990
Photograph by University of Victoria archives*

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Howard Petch: The Legacy We Must Honour and Preserve

Dr. Eric W. Sager
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Before I came to UVic in 1983, I had worked in four other universities of varying sizes, and in one I had held a tenure-track job. I knew nothing of university governance. I had been acquainted with department chairs, but I had never met a dean or a vice-president.

UVic was a strange place. When I came for the job interview, the department chair picked me up at the airport. I met the dean and had a long chat about my research. The dean, I was told, presided over regular meetings of the Faculty, where he discussed academic standards, teaching practices, recruitment, the direction of the Faculty, and much more. He sought feedback and appeared to take seriously what he heard. Shortly after joining the University I met the academic vice-president at a party, a man named Murray Fraser, and one of the finest administrators in UVic's history. He knew my name and knew that I was the new person in History. He asked serious questions about my research. The president was Howard Petch. He knew who I was too, especially after I engaged in public advocacy for post-secondary education in the mid-1980s, and I chatted with him in his office more than once.

The UVic of 1983, which still felt like a small arts and science university, has changed, if not disappeared. But something of its collegial governance remains today in the enduring legacy of the late Howard Petch, who was president from 1975 to 1990. It is sad and disturbing that the recent obituaries failed to acknowledge Petch's original contribution to the tradition of shared governance in North American universities. Universities are complex structures with lines of accountability running in many paths. Responsibility to the public is ensured through boards of governors that have ultimate responsibility for revenues, for property and for final approval of programs. Responsibility for academic standards is vested primarily in the Senate; here the University professoriate exercises control over standards and guarantees academic freedom, although for many years we have heard laments over the alleged decline of university senates and their influence. The ideal of the scholarly community run by and for scholars and teachers, as in C.P. Snow's novel *The Masters*, was always a dream. Shared governance seeks a workable compromise, a delicate balance between professorial

participation in decision-making on the one hand, and administrative and financial accountability on the other.

Howard Petch altered the balance by introducing a small, but deeply influential, element of democracy into a non-democratic corporate structure. The procedures he introduced were intended to solve specific problems that had arisen at UVic in the early 1970s, by restoring confidence and trust in administrators. It would be a mistake to imagine that the need for Petch's procedures ended with the disappearance of those problems. His change came to that key area of governance in which practices among universities vary considerably, and where the influence of faculty is often weakest: the selection of academic administrators. Every professor should read Petch's contribution: see, for instance, the Senate-approved Procedures for the Appointment of the Vice-President Academic and Provost, clause 14.06; and clause 29 of the procedures for the appointment of deans. Academic administrators are recommended for appointment by broadly-based committees that follow specific rules; administrators cannot be appointed at the pleasure of a few senior managers or a board of governors. The name of the recommended candidate is submitted to a ratification ballot among members of the unit they will serve, and must receive a minimum approval of sixty percent of votes cast before the recommendation can proceed (minimums may vary for department chairs; for an incumbent president seeking reappointment, there is a ballot, but it is non-binding).

Do you realize how rare, if not unique, are such procedures? I have heard objections voiced by senior administrators elsewhere such as: "That would restrict our ability to take tough decisions" or "That would result in ill-informed popularity contests." Such responses reflect either ignorance of principles of good governance, or contempt for the professoriate, or both. The responses to such objections are surely obvious: "Why are you afraid of even a small measure of democracy? Don't you realize that tough decisions are more likely to succeed when they have the support and understanding of those to whom they are applied? And why assume that the professors whom you serve are ill-informed?"

The history of the procedures at UVic confirms their great merit. The pace of change has not been slow; the quality of the administrators selected by such procedures has been very high; decision-making processes are, in general, remarkably efficient. The procedures tend to favour administrators who maintain consultative processes and strive for policies that have broad support, if not consensus. UVic is remarkably safe from governance by top-down executive order, a practice (common in many universities) that fosters cynicism and apathy among the professoriate. The procedures can serve as a predictor of administrative style. I recall one candidate for a dean's job who, upon learning of the Petch procedures for the first time, gave an immediate and telling response: "I would never want to serve a Faculty unless I knew that I had the confidence of members of that Faculty."

The best academic administrators understand all this and defend the procedures. The last thing Murray Fraser said to me, as he was leaving UVic in 1988, was: "Make sure this university never loses the Petch procedures." ■



Howard and Linda Petch in 2006.
Photograph by Ray Smith, Victoria Times Colonist

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The Petch Procedures

Dr. Doug Baer
Professor, Department of Sociology

“The Petch procedures are an important part of a robust collegial culture.”

Occasionally young scholars from elsewhere ask me: “What is it like to work at the University of Victoria?” Some are interested in finding work here, some want to evaluate job offers from us, while most are just curious. When I reply, I talk about the various ways in which we compare with other Canadian institutions, given my knowledge garnered as a faculty negotiator but also my past experience as faculty at two such universities. I tell people how wonderful living in Victoria is (I get to cycle year round!). At the same time, I tell them how expensive our housing market is (I have no idea how I would be able to afford coming here if I were a junior faculty member). I tell people looking at job offers to try to bargain for higher starting salaries because, at least across the first twenty years of their careers, the salary increments are likely to be a bit smaller than the average Canadian institution. I tell them the extended health benefits are at the “lower end” of benefit programs across Canada. At the same time, I inform them that the pension plan here is “well above average” – unless you are a teaching-only faculty member.

There are, of course, other reasons why people choose to come or not come to an institution, and one of these is their sense of what the “academic culture” is like. At the department level I tell people that UVic is not much different than other institutions, with some departments with incredible collective energy and “synergy,” but, like any institution, a couple of departments that are truly dysfunctional. University-wide, one of the signs of the health of an institution is, in my view, the culture of critical engagement that faculty have on matters relating to university affairs and the way in which established institutional norms and practices feed into or defeat such a culture. Here, I tell people that I am proud of my university.

When I arrived at the University of Victoria 18 years ago, I was surprised – and pleased – to find that department chairs and middle-level academic administrators cannot assume positions or get renewed in these positions without a ratification vote from all faculty members in the unit (department, school, faculty or, in some cases, university-wide). This set of practices and procedures is informally referred to as “The Petch Procedures” after former president Howard Petch. It is not the norm at Canadian institutions: for the most part, while faculty get to elect members of search committees, once these committees have made a recommendation an academic appointment becomes a “done deal.” There is no “consent of the governed.”

If one goes to the UVic web page and uses the search function, a search for “Petch Procedures” will not yield an account of what these procedures are, although one can find other information about Dr. Petch through the website. There is no one location where all “Petch Procedures” are listed; rather, one must go into individual administrator appointment procedures to see how these have been applied. In general, the requirements are that strong support must be shown (60% positive vote) once a selection committee has made its recommendation. The process applies to Chairs, Directors, Deans, Associate Deans, the Academic Vice President and some (but not all) of Associate Vice Presidents, the Vice-President Research and the Associate VPR. The procedures also call for people holding higher offices to “normally” serve no more than two terms, but the term “normally” can, in a legal sense, be used to justify exceptions for almost any reason. For example, it was invoked when David Turpin was offered a third consecutive term of office (shortly after which the two-term reference in the procedures for presidential appointment was removed altogether, as if to retroactively justify the invocation of the “normally” clause).

The Petch procedures are an important part of a robust collegial culture. Attend a university senate meeting anywhere in Canada, and you might be tempted to refer to what you saw as a “snooze fest.” Yet I can say that, having sat on senates at two other Canadian universities, senators at UVic are more likely to stand up and comment about proposals that may have “weakness around the edges” than they are at other institutions. While some might see this as a sign of insufficiently compliant faculty, I see this as a healthy sign, especially since the critical commentary and the occasional rejection of proposals (or, more likely, the senate equivalent of “Come back to us with a revise and resubmit!”) all follows a collective commitment to making the institution better and rarely if ever comes with “interpersonal nastiness”. This, after all, is what a culture of critical discourse – the very thing we as academics seek to promote in others – is all about. I am not saying we are perfect. For example, senate committees are far too concerned, in my view, about doing things in secret and placing secrecy rules around their work. But if I were to produce a score card ranking our collegial culture against just about any other Canadian institution, UVic comes out on top. I hope for the sake of future academics that we can all work together on keeping and indeed improving this important characteristic of our place of academic work. ■