

Moura Quayle, new Dean of Agriculture, talks to Wendy Holm.

October 1997 Column, Country Life in B.C.

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

HOLM: Well, you're a new Dean, but certainly not new to the Faculty. I gather you started at UBC in 1983. We'll start out with the obvious question: What are your priorities?

QUAYLE: For the last decade, we've been doing a lot of thinking about how we should be responding to sustainability issues... How we should be responding to rapidly changing student needs, rapidly changing student interests, let's put it that way, a rapidly changing market place for students... And so, we're at the point now that I think we're ready to make a decision. And they're tough choices.

HOLM: Exactly, and you've got, probably, budget cutbacks as well.

QUAYLE: We indeed have very major budget cutbacks. So we have to find a new way of operating, in a sense. And some of the pieces are easier than others. Faculty structure, administrative structure, for example. Right now, as you know, we're in departments. Some of those departments are very small. For faculty to operate in such a small collegial atmosphere is difficult. And to have a couple of support staff assigned to three or four faculty is costly.

HOLM: You also get a smokestack effect that creates isolation...

QUAYLE: Yes, that's right. So we're looking at all sorts of options. I have a bias toward thinking that we should be educating people at the University in literacy: language literacy, numerical literacy, ecological literacy, spatial/visual literacy. I agree with the folks who are saying undergraduate education is getting so specialized that we're losing people. They should be coming out with a really broad understanding of how society operates and how to be good citizens. How to know how to make change at the municipal level, at the provincial level, at the regional level.

So, I'm interested at least in us looking at that model and saying, what would happen if we really took a much more radical step? What if we say our undergraduate education is extremely broad, there's a co-op component to it, you can make some elective choices but basically you come out with a B.Sc. in, I don't know, let's say cultural literacy.

And, if we're really going to contribute to a sustainable horticulture industry — for one example — we then have to ask: What's the outcome we want these students to have? Where are they going to land? Where are they going to find employment? Where are they going to make their contribution? We need to be doing the research that moves all these industries along. And so it's very important that we partner with Quantlin, with all the University colleges so that we're really clear about who's doing what.

I guess the biggest message I really feel I want to send to the University and about the University is that we can't be protective of our little box of activities. On campus, there has been a tendency of saying: "This is our faculty. We're going to do everything we can to fight for its resources and fight for space." The Faculty of forestry moves out of the MacMillan Building next summer: I'm saying, Hey! this is an opportunity for us to invite people we should be rubbing shoulders with. The Institute of Resources and Environment, the Centre for Biodiversity, the Fisheries Centre... They have lousy space on campus. Let's invite them into a renovated MacMillan

Building and let's say: it doesn't matter what faculty people are in. We in agriculture want those kinds of connections.

HOLM: It seems to me we're always trying to resolve the short-term when we should be looking at the medium term. And a lot of it is politics. But the delivery of the medium term is the hardest and most pressing priority. The commonality between these faculties is that difficulty in constructing a bridge to the medium term. But if somebody doesn't look after the medium term....

QUAYLE: Yeah, we're in trouble.

HOLM: Yeah. Interesting.

QUAYLE: It's a wonderful time at the University. We have a new President. Who, you know, any new person brings in a different point of view. And a new academic vice-president. Three new Deans at the same time as I started. Four new Deans last year. It's a different group. So Agriculture's going to have to fit in to and want to fit in to bigger changes at the University level: how we're bridging so that students can get a really good and flexible program.

For instance, at a recent meeting with all the nutrition faculty we had people from medicine, from animal science, from nutritional sciences and from food sciences — a little disconnected. And if you're a student who really wants to gain the most out of this group of talented individuals, you'd be hard pressed to do it. It's a real opportunity to say, okay, guys, nutrition is hugely important and we should be promoting it. Every teacher, especially elementary school, should have an intro nutrition course. It's almost as basic as English 100. And so we're trying to send that message to them, that we've got an opportunity here to do much more.

HOLM: And agriculture is in an interesting position to be the advocate?

QUAYLE: Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. Because it connects the food system and the land system.

The University is moving toward this idea of a college of life sciences where we, as agricultural science faculty, contribute to those first year courses, send the message that this is a very interesting applied science and "come on in" to the second year of our program. I think that has some real opportunities. The other bottom line is, this (pointing to the word "agriculture") is a tough word to sell.

HOLM: I'm not sure that's what you mean.

QUAYLE: I think there's a perception with students that "agriculture" is about hoeing and digging. As a word, it doesn't certainly describe the breadth of activities in the faculty.

HOLM: That's partly because of the way we view farmers in our society, right?

QUAYLE: No doubt about it. For me, it's all about this urban-rural lack of balance; the fact that we, as urbanites, do not value what farmers do for us. We don't value their stewardship of the land. And what we don't value, we won't pay for...

HOLM: Interesting dynamics happening now, though. B.C. is this almost Lilliputian province with all these little hills and valleys; large scale monoculture, multinational corporation-contracted, thousand acre potato farms obviously cannot happen here. But, by the same token, we've created all sorts of disadvantages. Some we've been partner to. For example, Canada's recent waffling on anti-dumping protection, giving the Americans our water under the Columbia Treaty. Some are due to world conditions and changing trade rules. The point is, these large-scale, monoculture farms are

putting our farmers at tremendous risk. I've always contended, being in agriculture I guess now for some 27 years in Canada, that Canadian farm policy was based on the premise that if we had good farmers out there to begin with, well educated people, and we had good soil and we had good climate, and we gave them good farm extension and good market information, and we created an environment where we had the science and the partnerships there to assist them when they needed it, the sum of a lot of good individual decisions would be good collective agriculture. And it was maintaining the independence of farmers to make those good decisions, to say "today this makes sense and tomorrow that makes sense" that would make sure that the medium term was going to be out there when we needed it.

Canada took a very different approach to farm policy than they did in the States. Coming to the rescue for that public policy objective is the NIMBY stuff: "we're here in the Valley now but we don't want any more growth." That's not necessarily understanding agriculture, but it creates an ally that you can bring in on other issues.

How do you see the, I guess, the University responding to those issues? Where does the University fit in? I know, with your background in urban planning, that you understand the problems...

QUAYLE: Yes, and what kind of wicked problems they really are! I guess I do see it as a planning and education problem. What if we really decided that we needed were transition zones that were more community-supported agriculture? Smaller types of agriculture? Chosen very much as community integrators to become part of the way we build community and the connection to food?

I maintain that we need to do the same thing in the city of Vancouver. There needs to be ag land here. I mean, in a very intensive way.

HOLM: Like community gardens?

QUAYLE: Like community gardens, only on a more commercial basis. And if we can stop this "us and them", or not stop it but at least shift that kind of emphasis, then I think we go a long way to bringing a lot more understanding around "well, what about where this food comes from?" and all those issues.

So I think at some level, there has to be some very clear decisions about the basics. How are we going to keep our water clean and drinkable? How are we going to keep our air breathable?

HOLM: I think those are central issues. But I also think farmers are legitimately saying: "What about us? We've done a lot to ensure compliance with and build bridges to environmental priorities. We're holding the land against huge, rampant development. But, unless farmers are economically viable, who's going to be farming the land?"

I guess what I'm interested in is whether you have any thoughts on the role of the University — your ag economic department — in all of this? If you ask people, they're going to say, "yes, I support B.C. farmers", but then they turn around and don't do it. I think the Ministry's Spring poll is very encouraging and I think it should be cited and built upon: "If this is what you say you want, then guess what? Here's what you have to do to get it." I'd be interested in whether you see a role for the University in that discussion?

QUAYLE: I really see a big role. Our ag economics department is really decimated — we just lost Mary Bowman to a great job in Washington, D.C.; we also lost Jennifer Wall. Ag economics is currently in the Angus Building with Commerce. I don't think any huge liaisons were formed. So I'm bringing them back to MacMillan. Because here we are, Wendy, trying to establish an agro-ecology program, trying to talk about sustainable

agriculture, and we don't have the economists playing enough in the faculty! Rubbing shoulders with the other faculty; being influenced by the other faculty who are saying economics is a huge piece of this puzzle that we're trying to solve. I think that a) we need to bolster our economists and b) we need to bring some people in who are totally tuned in to the bigger picture.

HOLM: Good luck.

QUAYLE: Exactly, but I think they're out there. And because we're not going to tackle those problems anywhere without the team. And everyone has to be there.

HOLM: Enlightened governments around the world are taking some very strong and positive steps to protect their farm communities. Not decision distorting steps. Not commodity focused steps — we'll push you into this track and then when you scream, we'll push you into that. But very creative ways that communities and governments, regions, and drainage basins are taking to shore up the competitiveness of the farm sector while at the same time, saying to farmers “you are not fully responsible for public policy related to food.” That the public has a responsibility, and the state has a responsibility. And it seems to me that it is one of the most difficult dialogues to actually get going.

QUAYLE: I think that's right. I think one of the ways that the University can help is to change our course delivery model — borrowing from a landscape architecture design studio model — so that we have a number of courses where we would actually go out into a community and work with that community on a number of different issues. What would happen if the faculty did that? On an inter-disciplinary basis - planners, soil scientists, physical designers going into a small community for a month. Staying there. Not just zipping in and zipping out but staying there a month, two months, whatever the right timing is, and starting to really get at these kinds of issues? You could pull in the Agrologists, you could pull in the government. I think there's a real opportunity for us to do a much better job of community connecting. Its extension but not in the traditional sense of technical help going out; it's extension much more in the sense of participating in looking at solutions to some of those rural-urban and agriculture issues.

And at the other end of it is a much clearer communication about research and the research that needs to be done. I think that if we went into these communities, we would have a better idea of what research is needed. Then, perhaps, some of these ag-ec issues would evolve.

HOLM: How can we ensure that farmers are free to pursue good decisions making options? When you ask what is it that worries economists, you know, we've got this Goliath in Washington State, with yields of 33, 35, 40 tons to the acre of potatoes — highest yields in the world. And they're dumping into our market. And for reasons that economists understand, it makes perfect sense for them to continue to dump. So how do we protect this sector? If we could somehow label our food with ecological footprints, you would have some way of letting the consumer know that there's another real strong reason to support local product. And that there's a real cost to buying imported food. If we had some way of letting the consumer know this was very important, that's part of it.

I'm sad to hear that the ag-ec department has shrunk so much. Economics is a very important voice in the dialogue...

QUAYLE: I think it's plagued the faculty for a long time that we aren't a typical production agriculture faculty of agricultural sciences. It's different than Saskatchewan. It's different than U. of A. And I think there's been difficulty pinning down what that is and then marketing it. I've been using the word marketing. In fact, that's what we have to do.

HOLM: So you see UBC under your leadership as being more involved with community dialogue?

QUAYLE: Much more...

HOLM: Have you sat down and met with Catharine Read yet?

QUAYLE: She's on my list.

HOLM: So what do you think your biggest challenges are going to be over the next several years?

QUAYLE: I think that one of the challenges is going to be getting the word out, doing that marketing in a climate where we're going to have to be creative about how we do it because we can't go out and hire Madison Avenue.

HOLM: Who's going to carry that message?

QUAYLE: We have to send a message through our revised curriculum that this is an exciting place to be. This is in fact where the action is, and the same kind of thing around nutrition, around land, around the rural-urban issues, that this is really important work. If we don't attract students, Wendy, we're going to die. And the University has committed, by hiring a new Dean, that they're going to have a faculty like ours. So we have to live up to that and say, "absolutely right."

It's never going to be as big as science and arts, but its going to be a very important player in the future. So one of our challenges is getting that happening. It has to do with attracting students, with getting that going.

To be better community connectors, I think we have to break down a lot of the images of the University as being disconnected. A lot of our faculty do an incredible amount of community work. But we have to convince the University that that work is valuable and that people should be rewarded for that kind of work. And that everybody isn't a star researcher. Some people are star community people. Some people are star teachers. That's a job that I have to take on along with my fellow Deans in shifting how we reward what happens.

I think UBC is better connected with its Asian and Pacific Rim communities than it is with its local and provincial communities. It occurred to me when we were in Merritt and in Kamloops and Prince George, that if we're the University of British Columbia, how do we do that kind of community connecting? A good example is Oyster River Farm on Vancouver Island. What a wonderful resource. So we have to connect it better academically. Which comes back to changing course delivery, which is another challenge. How are we going to get the University to free up from that Monday/Wednesday/Friday one hour lecture, Tuesday/Thursday kind of system so that we can send students to Oyster River for a two week intensive experience in agro-forestry.

HOLM: And not having to do it in the summertime when they're out making money to go back in the fall.

QUAYLE: That's right. The other challenge is that we've got to get some kind of new, hybrid co-op program going. That's one of the ways we're going to attract students. Quite sensibly, they're saying: "I want an integrated education." This week is an example. You say to your students: "Well, how was your summer? How was your summer job?" "Oh, it was great! I was working in the regional district of Comox-Strathcona and I realize what it's like to work in government, and what the public thinks. And I'm bringing a whole new way of thinking and a whole new set of challenges into my

course work now." So, we've got to get more mentoring going. You should have a protégé. You should be connected to one student in our faculty who you see once a month. That kind of thing has to get happening.

HOLM: Do you look at the things you do as, 'when I'm finished this, I would like to have said or felt that I accomplished this or that'? Just starting a job, it may be curious to ask what you would like to be remembered for having done in it, but is there any passion that you bring to your job you'd like to be remembered for?

QUAYLE: I would really feel good if the faculty and the staff said at the end of six years, we're a real team.

QUAYLE: I feel that if you can make the people thing happen, then our energy is going to take us out into doing the kinds of things we need to be doing. And if we're feeling ground into the ground by the University bureaucracy, by lack of movement, you know, then we aren't going to be able to do what we need to do with the students and for all of the different causes that we feel responsible for.

So, it's a people issue. I'm really trying hard on the one hand to involve Faculty and make sure that all of the ideas are valued, and on the other hand, I'm going to have to be tough about making these decisions and some people are not going to be happy. And I said this in my interview: "You know, guys, we're going to have disagreements. But this is a designer speaking. When a designer does work, you have to separate yourself from the work. So, when you criticize this, you aren't criticizing Maura Quayle. Remember that."

HOLM: And relax...

QUAYLE: Yeah. It's okay. I can take it. I can take it. This is the only way we're going to move forward is by having those kinds of discussions.

HOLM: What is your biggest criticism?

QUAYLE: My biggest criticism of the faculty right now is that we don't have intellectual debates. There's no time. There's no forum. We haven't that kind of culture. And there's no space for it. I mean, there's lots of reasons... So, we're starting a community lecture series in January.

HOLM: Where would you see that going? Into the Fraser Valley?

QUAYLE: I would see it happening in all sorts of places. And it's part of the faculty continuing education. We're also starting a new course called "towards a sustainable agriculture" and we're going to be connecting the community lecture series.

So I'm going to go after Wendell Barry. I'm going to go after Wes Jackson. We've got to bring people here — and these people (pointing to the book *Holding Your Ground*); I'm going to go after those people, American Farmland Trust.

And then we can partner with the B.C. Institute of Agrologists and say, we want to bring in this person. We've got two thousand bucks; can you come up with five hundred? Or whatever. The intellectual debate is a really important part of the evolution of the faculty. Biotechnology, is that a good thing? I don't know. But I think we should be talking about it instead of saying, yeah, this is it or, no, it isn't. Same thing with aquaculture. We owe it to our students to have these kinds of debates.

HOLM: Pretty exciting. Does anything scare you?

QUAYLE: Oh, yeah. Right now, because Gay (Huchelaga) left, I have a new faculty administrator. She's wonderful but both of us are new, so we're trying to come to grips with this budget and its very complex. What scares me is in my eagerness to be a public University faculty person (consistently saying, no, I'm not going to go into protective mode, we'll do what's best for the University), I'm worried that I'll make some mistakes that will impact negatively because I won't have read the political framework as well as I should have. Because of my passions around whatever we're doing and my belief that it's right.

HOLM: If you had one message to the farmers of the province, what would it be?

QUAYLE: Call us. I do mean that, because if the farming community has some problems, we'd like to know about them and maybe we can respond to them either by going and visiting and saying well, that's an interesting problem. Gee, we've got so and so doing that, and we'd love to tackle that.,,

HOLM: You also need a farmer liaison person to run around and bring some things back.

QUAYLE: We absolutely do and in fact, I'm even, in the back of my mind, I'm calling that the community connection person. Absolutely. It's going to be incremental. We aren't going to be able to just say, okay... We go to Senate on September 12th and we say, Great! This is happening! We've done it! Uh Uh. No. This is going to be a real process of evolution and I think that's okay.