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Gadfly Professors Ferency, Adams and Larrowe: Free-wheeling speculation, reminiscence and wit

Proving they're not one of 'them'

"I'm not sure I like the company," quipped Walter Adams when he was approached about an interview for this issue's cover story about himself, Lash Larrowe and Zolton Ferency. Nevertheless, he agreed, as did the others, to a get-together in which MSU's gadflies delved fearlessly into matters of what they might have in common. From a free-wheeling hour of speculation, reminiscence and wit emerged a mutual sense of purpose and, perhaps more important, an unflinching optimism: simply, if one keeps at it, things can be made better. Assistant Editor Jan Brydon sat in on the session and provides these excerpts:

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Ferency: "Looking at what the three of us have in common, first, I believe we are truly interested in being liberal in our approach to the problems of the university. That means we don't go into any situation with a fixed notion of the way it was, it is or it ought to be. We're open-minded. Secondly, we're in favor of everybody having an opportunity to participate both in the discussion and the ultimate decision. I think that separates us almost immediately from 98 per cent of this crazy campus."

Larrowe: "There is a great deal more faculty participation in the university now — as little as there is — which dates back to the time Walter was president. He encouraged people to speak up at Academic Council meetings and a lot of people figured, well, he's one of us, temporarily in the presidency and I don't have to fear him the way a lot of people feared Uncle

John Hannah. They started speaking up and they got in the habit of it. The university hasn't recovered from that and I don't think it will."

Ferency: "Walter believes that one can take new fresh looks at issues and at problems and that one can rely on democratic means to seek solutions to those problems. Now that's a quality that not too many administrators have. They don't want it because it means sharing power and that's an extremely difficult thing to do."

"In addition, I think all three of us provide continuity with events that happened in the past and people who think the way we do. We are the bridges to an earlier, liberal, radical approach to problems, and have acceptance in the younger generation. And that is not easy to do these days. We have not lost our credibility in two generations."

"We all performed in the New Deal days. We were all politicking before the McCarthy period, during the McCarthy period and after the McCarthy period and we survived it. Lash, I know that you had a lot more problems with McCarthyism, probably a hell of a lot more, than the rest of us. Were they chasing you more than they were chasing most people?"

Larrowe: "Not really. The FBI had a big file on me and all that, but I'm not aware of any harrasment or any kind of retaliation. There may have been positions I wasn't considered for due to information in my file, but I'm not aware of it."

Ferency: "How about you, Walter?"

Adams: "No, I was very fortunate in my younger days never to have embraced any radical cause. I was turned off by the radical personality. This was an emotional reaction, not an intellectual reaction.

"This reminds me of the crack of Thomas Nixon Carver of Harvard. 'The trouble with radicals is that they only read radical literature. And the trouble with conservatives is that they don't read at all.' I sort of rejected both of these groups for the same reason: That is, they had blinders on. I couldn't get myself to embrace an organized religion and I couldn't get myself to embrace a rigid ideology for the same reasons."

Larrowe: "Zolton, how did you put up with the radicals in the Human Rights Party?"

Ferency: "You hear them out and usually, if they can't get their way, they quit and cloister themselves somewhere — and they get smaller and smaller and smaller until they disappear."

Adams: "Well, this was my experience in the presidency. You know, of course, there were great pressures to suppress them, to bash their heads in, teach them a lesson, teach them the meaning of law and order. The cruel thing that I did was to listen to them, to let them speak and they talked themselves out of success."

Larrowe: "No, no. That's not quite the way I'd put it. The really cruel thing you did was to listen to them and then to joke with them. I remember one episode over at Dem Hall where they were going to sack the hall. By the time Walter got through kidding around with the leaders, everyone was laughing."

Ferency: "That's another characteristic the three of us share. We have never lost our sense of humor. And Walter's always being quoted on witticisms. So are you, Lash, and I've been, likewise. I think it is very, very useful to keep your sense of humor about serious affairs — *serious* affairs. You don't take issues lightly, but you're always willing to see some humor or satire in them."

Larrowe: "Or sometimes you see yourself as others see you — which is laughable."

Adams: "To see the absurdity in a situation and see the absurdity in yourself in that situation. It isn't humor in the sense of a one-line gag. It's a great self-defense mechanism. And, in a way, it's a cruel political tool in dealing with people. I'll always remember Larrowe's column for the *State News* in which he wrote, 'I don't know what the faculty is complaining about in terms of salary increases; I got my usual \$5,000 increase.'"

Larrowe: "I got about \$400."

Adams: "Well, that was beside the point. Any rational person who has been around for any length of time should understand that nobody at the university gets a \$5,000 increase. One dean reported to me that by 9:05 on the morning the column was published, three members of his college had come to his office and said, 'If that son of a bitch got \$5,000, how come I only got x or y or z?' Now, that's depressing.

"And humor is a very dangerous tool politically if you use it to attract the multitudes because — well, look at Adlai Stevenson. He had all kinds of problems, of course, being the opponent of an Eisenhower. He would have lost, no matter — irrespective of his humor — but I think his humor cost him untold votes because most people thought he was taking lightly, serious issues that one ought not to treat with levity."

Ferency: "I've had earnest radicals say, 'Don't trivialize.'"

Adams: "But the alternative is to be an earnest bleeding

heart type where they can then dismiss you for being an earnest bleeding heart type."

Ferency: "Are there people coming up who are going to take our places? I see some, but the thing that troubles me is that they lack perseverance. If they can't see immediate results, they get discouraged.

"I think you need a longer view of things. You know, we were pretty desperate in those days [the Depression]. It was very bad where I was on the southwest side of Detroit. It was devastated. But even in the darkest hour, there was hope. And there was a confidence of sorts that we could work our way out of this thing. And young folks today have a very, very bleak outlook. They are not as optimistic as we were. And they're not as trusting as we were. They're not as sure of the system or of its foundations as we were."

Adams: "I think today's young people lack the faith in the future, and therefore, they're not really prepared to take the long view. Now, youth, of course has always been impatient. That's just a characteristic of that stage of life. And their idealism, such as it is, is a very personal idealism. They keep asking the question, 'What the hell is in it for me?' In the Depression if you asked that question, it was almost ridiculous because you realized that there was nothing in it for you unless you could solve the problem which was a social problem and not an individual problem. And to some extent, I hate to sound like a preacher, our souls have gotten fat and flabby because we really start from a much higher place. Nobody is hungry, nobody is worried about having a shirt on his back tomorrow. These are marginal psychological problems, rather than basic problems of survival."

Ferency: "But even with this improved standard of living, I think the issues that the people are facing are much more serious than a Depression or a World War. For example, the depletion of natural resources and the impact on the environment — things that are extremely difficult to predict. I think maybe that's the problem, that, in a very real sense, these young people feel that there may not be solutions to these problems."

Adams: "I think it's that faith that's become eroded so that people will opt out and try to save their own skin. A Jonestown thing, you know, is simply a symptom of this more fundamental phenomenon."

Larrowe: "Walter, do you ever get a feeling of pessimism about what we're doing as professors? That maybe we're not really accomplishing a whole hell of a lot as educators?"

Adams: "Look, I go through life on the assumption that what I do makes a difference. At the same time, I know damn well that it doesn't make very much of a difference. But no matter what profession you choose, that's true."

Ferency: "I have sort of the same philosophy. But I look at it just a little bit differently. It makes a difference to me. And that's very important because it allows me to go to bed at night and rise the next morning and face the world and say that I'm doing my best and I'm not cheating anybody out of anything and I can live with myself."

Adams: "That reminds me of a parable: A wise man came to this small town and he cried out against injustice and at first some people listened to him. Then fewer and fewer people listened to him. And finally they had all dismissed him as a madman. A couple of children came up to him in the later stages and they said, 'Why do you keep on saying the things you are saying for so long when nobody is listening to you?' And his answer was 'To prove to myself that I'm not one of them.'"