



WILLIAM JOHNSON

Don't force retirement

Dickason is proof of ability beyond 65

OTTAWA — Olive Dickason lost in the Supreme Court of Canada this week, and every Canadian over the age of 65 lost with her.

Dickason, 72, professor of history at the University of Alberta, had challenged her university's mandatory retirement policy at the age of 65. She turned 65 in 1985.

Once a reporter for *The Gazette*, then a historian, she is living proof of the perversity of requiring a university professor to retire at age 65.

This year, Dickason published "Canada's First Nations; A History of Founding Peoples from the Earliest Times" that I think should be read by every Canadian.

I have devoured every word of its 590 pages. Until then, I had felt the terrible lack of a comprehensive history of aboriginals in the territory that is now called Canada.

Like just about every other Canadian past the age of 20, I had been fed a racist "history" at school that justified the invasion of the New World by Europeans, that ignored or minimized the cultural achievements of the people who were here at the time of contact, and treated them as savages who were fortunate to be occupied by Europeans to teach them civilization.

An antidote to prejudice

This racist history was continued in attitudes encountered in real life. For instance, for years at the National Assembly in Quebec, the front door of the main legislature building was routinely called "la porte du sauvage" because there is a statue of a traditional Indian family before the door.

Dickason's book is an antidote to centuries of prejudiced reporting on the aboriginal people and their descendants. A Métis herself, she brings both passion and meticulous scholarship to her history.

mous contribution aboriginals of this hemisphere made to the agriculture of the world. Those contributions include: corn, potatoes, tomatoes, peanuts, pineapples, cacao (the basis of chocolate), tobacco and about 100 other species of plants still grown today.

Her history begins about 50,000 years ago and ends at 1989. In between, she tells an epic story.

Had Dickason retired in 1985, as her university's rules then required, we would not have today this invaluable history. How many historians of any age in Canada have made a contribution to history and to public enlightenment within the past seven years to compare with Dickason's work?

And yet, four of the seven Supreme Court justices upheld the university's right to enforce retirement on all faculty members at the age of 65. They conceded that the mandatory retirement was discrimination on the basis of age, but found that such discrimination was "reasonable and justifiable in the circumstances."

Here, in summary, was the argument accepted by the court.

Reasonable discrimination

"The objectives of mandatory retirement were stated to be the preservation of tenure, the promotion of academic renewal, the facilitation of planning and resource management and the protection of retirement with dignity for faculty members. . . . They are of sufficient significance to justify the limitation of a constitutional right to equality."

The key concept is security of tenure. Professors with tenure are guaranteed their position until age 65. Hence, renewal of the faculty requires the right to get rid of them at the first opportunity.

The tradition of tenure for academics was born in Prussia at a time when the emperor had autocratic powers in an intolerant society, when professors were few, there were no labor codes or faculty unions. Tenure was required to preserve academic freedom.

Today, in a democratic and pluralist society, with all the protections of numbers, labor codes, unions and collective agreements, tenure protects ancient privilege, not academic freedom.

Universities have chosen to attack an entire category of citizens — teachers over the age of 65 — rather than deal directly with the problem of ensuring that the professors teaching at any time are the best available — whatever their age.

Dickason lost, but in a good cause. The fight to free universities from the grip of the past will be pursued.

Students have the right to the best professors. Society has a right to remove archaic privileges from the professorate. And people should have the right be evaluated on their competence to do a job — both before and after the age of 65.