

the **Ed/Op** pages

# **F**rom the Ivory Tower Stick to the curved and twisting path

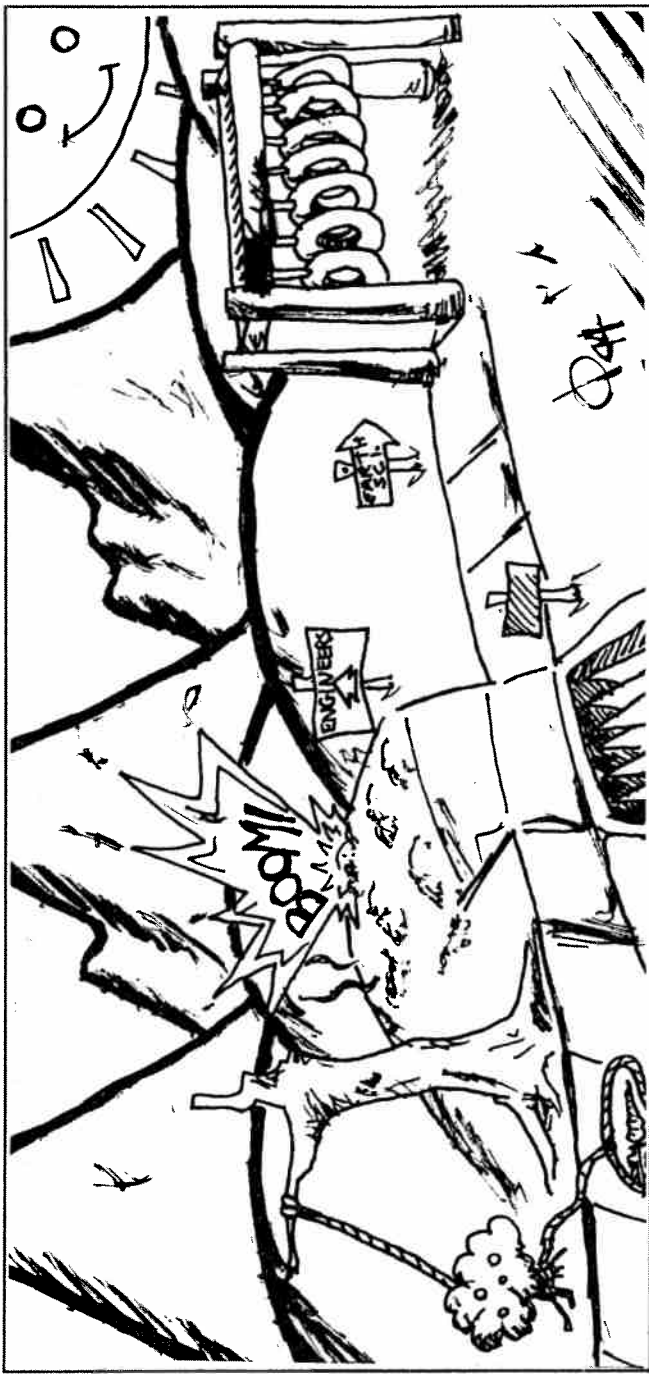
*A weekly column dedicated to giving profs a kick at the soap box.*

**T**he next time you're walking around campus, take a few minutes to study our sidewalks. Curving in long, graceful arcs, they lead you where you want to go—from one doorway to another. Note also that, precisely because the sidewalks take you efficiently from portal to portal, there are very few beaten paths across the lawns.

They weren't always this way, however. When I first arrived here in 1968, the University of Calgary had a typical rectangular sidewalk plan. There were lots of paved walkways making perfect right angles, and lots of beaten paths across the grass. People didn't use the sidewalks because they didn't help them get where they wanted to go.

Then our grounds keeping department got the message. During the '70s, they gradually ripped up the symmetrical but useless rectangular grid and paved the paths that people had made across the campus. Now, every time a new building goes up, they take the same approach when they lay new pavement.

If you've read this far, you're probably wondering, "What does this have to do with anything?" In fact, it's a perfect metaphor for government's role in the economy. Government ought to be a means of facilitation—of allowing citizens to be more efficient in doing what they want to do. People naturally want to own things, to buy and sell, to make agree-



ments, to employ each other, and to invest their wealth. Government facilitates all these cooperative activities by making and enforcing rules about property, contracts, estates, family, incorporation, securities, and so on. It's like paving the beaten paths: see where people want to go, then make the way easier.

What government emphatically should *not* do is to try to control the economy—to direct investments, set minimum and maximum prices, tell employers who to hire and how much to

pay. Such central control may look good as an abstract idea—just as the rectangular sidewalk system has a certain abstract appeal—but it will be ignored and evaded if it doesn't correspond to the intentions of actual people.

Socialism is a failed experiment in building rectangular sidewalk systems for whole societies. Fortunately, the world has recognized the failure of the experiment, and socialism is everywhere in disarray. The few remaining bastions, such as Cuba, North Korea, and Bob

Rae's Ontario, will not last long.

When you walk on our beautiful, curving sidewalks, remember that our groundskeepers were in the forefront of the battle against socialism. In their own way, our sidewalks are a monument of that struggle—not as poignant as the crumbling ruins of the Berlin Wall, but still worth a glance.

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