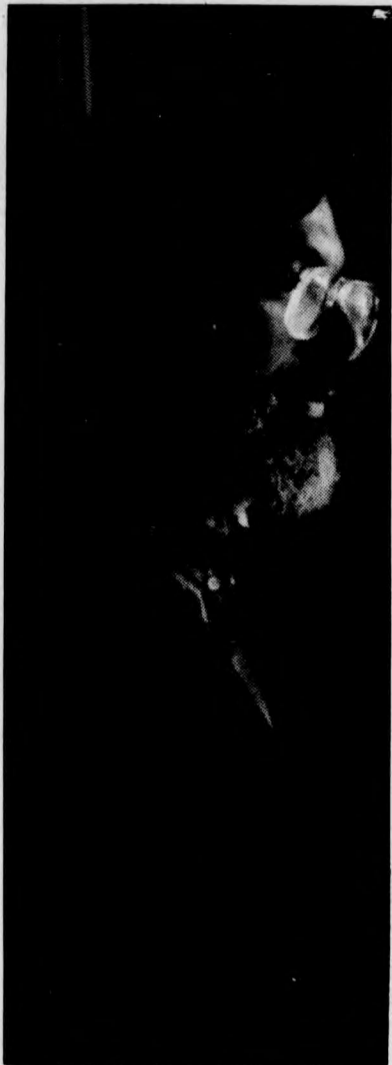


After the White Paper: Arthurs on government reform



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President Arthurs

York has been burdened with ineffective central student government for years. But with the release of President Arthurs' White Paper — a document which will drastically reform student government at York—this may change.

The reform process began about three years ago when Paul Gilmor, Provost of the University of Guelph, was hired by the Student Relations Committee (SRC) of the Board of Governors (BOG) to study student government at York. Gilmor's subsequent report, released about two years ago, served as the basis for much of the ensuing discussion on the topic.

The SRC released a paper in fall 1987 which was primarily based on Gilmor's document. Since then, President Arthurs has released a series of draft student government reform papers based on Gilmor's report, the SRC paper, and ongoing written and face-to-face discussions with student leaders.

The result is a comprehensive document out-

lining a number of major reforms to student government at York. Among the major changes included in the paper, the White Paper states that all students will be represented by a central student government (the CYSF for undergraduates and the Graduate Students Association for graduate students), college membership will be mandatory for first-year undergraduate students, student governments will be formed at the faculty level in addition to the present college level, and special Student Activity Funds will be established for both faculty and college governments to encourage co-curricular and extra-curricular programmes.

Arthurs' document has already been approved by the SRC and will be presented to the Board of Governors in December. If it is approved by the Board, the reforms will take effect January 1.

Excalibur's Adam Kardash recently spoke to Arthurs about the White Paper. The following is an excerpt of that interview.

Excalibur: A few weeks ago CYSF President Tammy Hassfeldt stated in *Excalibur*: "Student input throughout the entire process has had relatively little impact on the President. The Green Paper still contains many of the principles that student government has disagreed with from the beginning." But the White Paper took into account most of the concerns raised by student leaders.

President Arthurs: I was very pleased with Tammy's reaction to the final draft. But I must say that she hasn't been involved since the beginning. She has only been involved since last April or May, at the heart of things. The Paper always was significantly informed by student opinion. A lot of this goes back two or three years to discussions with people like Rea Ali and Gerard Blink and a number of other people. So this has been a cumulative process. . . . At our last meeting, that I had with Tom Meiniger and the students, a lot of good points were put on the table and I tried to respond to them in the final version.

Excal: The White Paper guarantees student governments the right to receive a direct per capita levy (following approval by a referendum). But from discussions with student leaders, it seemed that a direct levy was something that you were originally opposed to.

Arthurs: I have always been for it. On that particular point I maybe have to fault myself. Maybe my choice of words wasn't clear enough. But from the beginning I have been committed to that.

Excal: You originally set a standard of 10 per cent voter turnout for referendums. But in the final paper you opted not to include any such figures. Why not?

Arthurs: Tammy and Lee Wiggins (President of the Graduate Students Association), said to me, "Don't get hung up on a particular percentage." A percentage is a way of testing that the referendum isn't a sham and that there is some genuine attention paid to the wishes of the people who are going to be levied. They said, "Why don't we sit down to see if we can find other ways to ensure that any given referendum isn't a sham?" And I said, "Of course, let's do that."

So that's what is going to happen. Things that have been suggested are the amount of advertising, number of polling stations, and hours of access. And those things might equally serve as guarantees that a referendum isn't just whisked through in the dead of night.

Excal: Ten per cent of the student body seems to be a small number of voters for a referendum. Nevertheless, as Tammy and Lee stated — and you agreed — it is unrealistic to expect that amount of voter turnout.

Arthurs: It is pretty sad if we can't count on 10 per cent of the people turning out. I think that there is a bit of a chicken and egg problem here. The only reason 10 per cent is problematic is because there has been a long history of apathy and ineffective attempts by central student governments to penetrate the life of the student body. I hope that is changing for lots of reasons, not just because of the White Paper, but for lots of other reasons. And I hope that in the future, 10 per cent will look like a minimal turnout.

The fact of the matter is that I was looking into a recommendation of a 20 per cent standard. That is what Provost Gilmor and the Student Relations Committee had recommended as well. I moved it down to 10 in the White Paper.

Excal: There was considerable concern about the Deans and Masters having too much control over the new Faculty and College Student Activities Funds. However, you seemed to address these concerns in the White Paper with the inclusion of a number of obligations for the Deans and Masters to consult their respective student governments.

Arthurs: Well, I work the Deans all the time. I know that they are accountable people. I know that they are used to having to tell the relevant vice-

president and myself how they spend their money. So, when I said the money could only be spent for certain purposes and following certain consultations, in quite general language, I was confident that the Deans and Masters would do what they had to do.

But that is because I work with them all the time and I understand that people who aren't that familiar with how senior administrators work might think that there is a real risk that they might just go off and apply the money to some other purpose, or not sit down and genuinely consult. So I guess I made explicit what I assumed would be there, and I think people whose money it is are entitled to that assurance.

Excal: You stated that the Administration will examine how other universities inform their student body about Student Activity Fees. What will you be doing, and do you think the Administration is providing sufficient information to students about their Student Activities Fees?

Arthurs: I don't know if there is a problem with this at York. I am told by some people that we are the only university in Canada that holds the present kind of undifferentiated Student Activity Fee. In fact, there are a half dozen categories. It is broken out. But I am told that we give less information than any other university in Canada.

To be honest, I don't think anybody knows, neither ourselves nor the people concerned about this, what other universities do. They may have two or three other universities in mind. So I would just like to satisfy myself that York students are getting the same kind of information that students (attending universities) are generally getting. I want them to feel confident that the money is, in fact, going for things that are important to the student body. And I have nothing to hide. So as soon as we can write to the major universities we'll draw up a list of the results of our research and we'll adhere to good practice.

Excal: What is your opinion of student government at York, and ultimately, what will be the effect of the White Paper?

Arthurs: I do have a sense that student government at York has been plagued for as long as I can remember with debates about what it should be when it grew up. Constitutional questions have so often pre-empted all other considerations that they haven't actually always gotten around to doing the things that they want to do and which we would like them to do. There have been constant tensions about our colleges — affiliated or not affiliated with CYSF — or is this one or that one in or out, and what are the terms. . . .

I really wanted to stop that discussion. The purpose of all student government is to serve the students by providing more advocacy with representation, with services, with leadership — that's the function.

I didn't want to get involved. It wasn't my idea to start with, but I inherited an ongoing debate. I got involved out of the genuine conviction that student governments could do a whole lot of good. But the way to focus them on programmes, activities, and advocacy is to have them stop talking about their constitution. So, I hope now that there will be a period of at least some years when strengthened student government — focused student government — will really do a good job for students in this university. I think it will.

Excal: In roughly three years, a review of the White Paper's regulations will take place. What state do you think student government will be in at that time?

Arthurs: I hope [student government] will be strengthened and more effective. I think it will be good for the students. It will coincide with heightened activity, I hope, at the college level, with the opening of the new Student Centre, with the new residences, and with some work we are doing on improving the cultural milieu of the campus. So it will be really important to have strong student government when the whole tempo of activity is picking up. I think students can be important leaders in the new sense of community life that we are developing.

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