

Free Speech

Sixties rebellion: what happened?

"...As the players tried to take the field, the marching band refused to yield..."

Cardinal Newmann's idea of a good university is an idea that has stood for many years and it still stands today. He insisted that a university is an institution that fosters a liberal education which opens and enlarges the mind, a basic Aristotelean consideration that assigns the highest priority to human reason. While this conception of a good university has not changed, student attitudes and government attitudes have, indeed, changed.

Decade Talk, while it is purely ideological talk, serves as a useful lens through which one can look at the student movements of the sixties and seventies. Given that the time is near, do you wonder who the students of the eighties will be? Moreover, will they constitute a movement at all?

The sixties, it seems, was a time of political awareness. Joan Baez and Bob Dylan sang protest songs and Martin Luther's "We Shall Overcome" became the anthem for the young and other oppressed groups. The sixties was a time of reaction; everything was syncopated with everything else — the war in Vietnam, colonialism in the third world, the apparent contradictions of the capitalist system. A rebellious student attitude grew rapidly in the United States and spread across the border to Canada.

The early seventies saw similar suspicions but with less conviction. A friend of mine who was at York in the early seventies calls it a "confessional period when students were not afraid to admit that they were messed up or spaced out. It was a time of innocence, a time of confidences." My friend smiles as she looks back and recalls the days when scrip bought booze; they were the Camelot days of "money and honey" when students related well to Stephen Stills' lyric "Love the One You're With".

Then something happened.

Something profound. Something so quiet in its coming that nobody felt it until it came. Perhaps it can be best described

as an overt pessimism. Economic pressures intruded into the realm of student life. The Food and Beverage Office revoked the students' right to spend scrip on liquid diets in the college pubs. At York, the coffee shops and pubs retreated into the protective clutches of collegelife and the Ross Building assumed a more cold, luminous presence. The 9th floor, with all its hierarchical implications, became the enemy.

The late seventies is neither a time of protest nor confession; it is a time of contention and contest. Freedom is no longer "just another word for nothing left to lose"; one does not have much to lose so he holds on to and hoardes what is his. The concept of personal survival is pre-eminent and manifests itself ultimately in the apathy towards student politics and the lack of a collective student effort at making the university a better place to be.

In 1978, we marched down at Queen's Park to protest the government cutbacks in education. Yet, despite the banners we carried and in spite of the words that we chanted, it felt somewhat superficial. Ritual without religion. Form void of content. The once-radical query of "what is to be done" has been undone to become, "well, what can we do, anyway?"

The universities are not being accountable to the students as consumers of education; rather, the university is held accountable to the government, in turn, to the voters. For reasons that are not entirely clear to us, the government has recoiled from the university like a disenchant-ed lover.

If the university is to remain the home for higher learning, internal cutbacks are detracting from this intention. If a

progressive society is determined to provide for a well educated populous of the future, then the government's intent to see the finances for this system come from the have-nots at the bottom rather than the haves from the top is clearly a case of misplaced logic.

It is truly ironic that a year that has been recognized as the "International Year of the Child" is also a year that is especially darkened by severe restraint on the part of the government towards education. The children we honor this year will be the students of the later eighties. Who will they be? A displaced generation?

In his new book entitled "The University: The Anatomy of Academe," Murray G. Ross, President Emeritus of York University, writes about the earlier student movements: "There has seldom been a time in history when students throughout the world united spontaneously to press their views on society and to act together to change traditional thought...The fire of the revolution had died by 1975, but it had, in the very least, raised, both within the university and in the wider community, fundamental questions about the purpose of higher education; how it should be organized, governed and directed; how much, if any, freedom and autonomy there should be in the universities."

Although the student movement of the eighties will not near the dynamism of the student movement of the sixties which grew up in a decade of war, there is once again a need for students to gain concern over the place of the university as the institution of higher learning. Crawl out from the woodwork. Ask one question. If the players will not unite to take the field, we might as well join the marching band and face the music our ears do not need to hear.

Andrea Doucet



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