

Leadbeater The second coming



now, as we've needed for a long time, the serious interest in political platforms, political programmes, political ideas. And so long as students continue to foster the idea that you vote for people who have the best kickline, which is not something I gather that's been used too much recently, but things approximate to that or students that are the nicest guys, so long as students are into that, then there can't be political progress. People have to pose political ideas to the students in terms of their platforms, in terms of their practical activities on campus, or else students will not rally when the serious issues do come up, behind them. So that would be one of the first things, we need more political programmes, more political platforms. This might mean slates for the student government, it might mean some political parties running, it might mean coalitions among students around certain issues. But any of those kinds of things would be an advance over simply having personality politics, as I call it.

Another thing that I think is very important, is the question of student power in its old form, representation on committees. Great progress was made in getting students onto committees, but this progress sort of fell short of its goal because students have not been actively involved on those committees, in one way or another, they have not been united as well. Now unless students are united, and unless they have a clear political idea of what they're going to do when they get on these committees, it probably will be of no avail for the students in the long run to even have the representation. The representation is there. It should be used, and it can only be used, again as I mentioned earlier, are clear on their political goals and on what sorts of things they would like to see to improve the situation of students on campus. And of course the major step towards this is a more democratic university where students do have greater freedom to propose ideas and to make themselves heard politically. I think those are the two most important things at the moment. The first thing is greater emphasis on concerted and serious political action and the other emphasis is on a democratic movement, a movement involving the broad mass of the students.

Saidman: In relation to a democratic movement, then, would this mean that you would favour a voluntary students' union?

Leadbeater: By no means, I think that the students' union as it presently exists has many serious problems but that's not because students' unions are bad, that's because the SU's present politics are bad. It was like, for example, CUS. Many people had thought CUS had gone awry, and I think that in many ways it had, but it could have been corrected; it didn't need to be destroyed. The defeat of CUS by breaking it up was a victory for the right wing, and for the forces, as far as I'm concerned, of political reaction. I don't think that right now the forces of political reaction would be any less happy, I think rather, that they would be just as happy to see the demise of the present students' union. But I don't think they can win on this case. I think most of the students do see a need for a students' union, but I do think that in some way the present students' union can be corrected without too much trouble.

Saidman: Do you think that the students' union is an undemocratic thing?

Leadbeater: Well, it's not undemocratic if the majority of the students decide that it is the best way to defend their interests. It's very important, you see, that students are in some kind of a students' union, that they be engaged in making democratic and open decisions. I mean, that's one criticism—to say that the students' union is undemocratic is a very serious criticism and it may be true. But to say, you know, that people shouldn't have a students' union at all or have any democratic decision-making processes to defend their interests is another thing. And obviously, if it becomes voluntary it will collapse and there'll be certain students who will become involved just for their own ends and it will become a very soft and weak organization. I mean the students can hardly represent their interests right at the moment as it is because of the weak politics of the students' union. In the future, it would be even worse if it were voluntary...

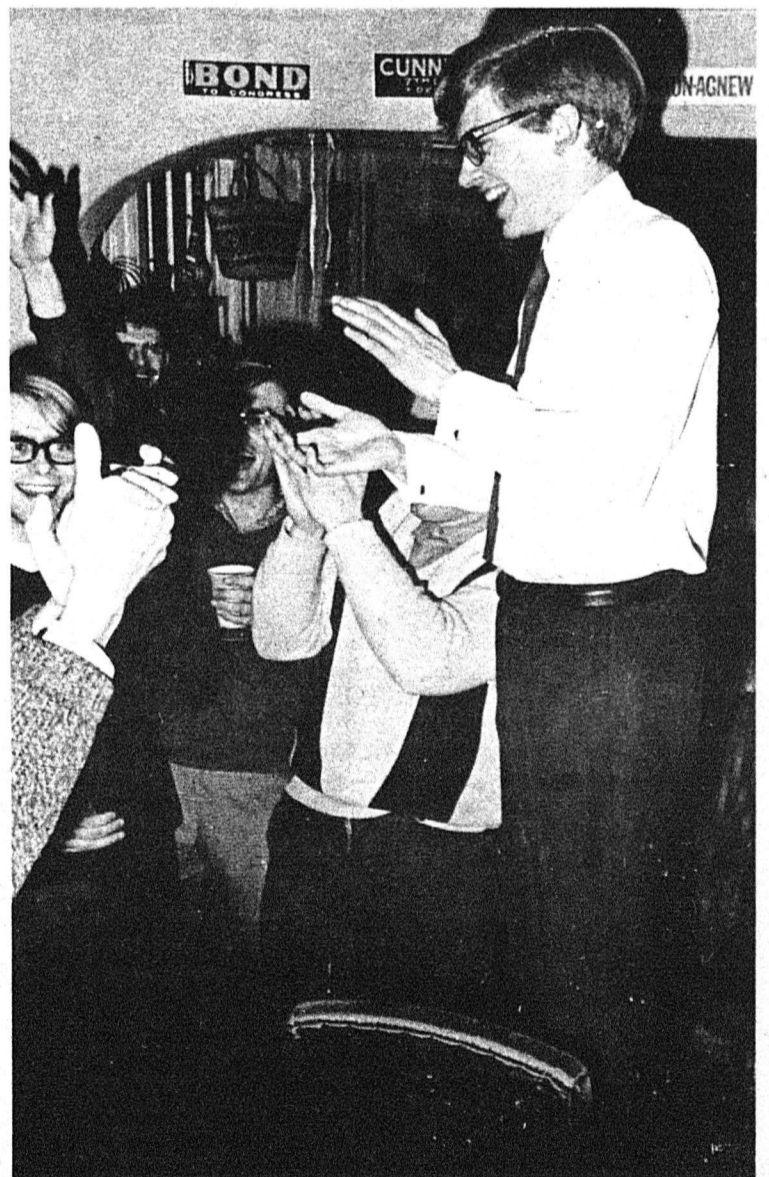
... the resurgence of careerism among students which I think is unfortunate in the particular aspect it's taking now. Because of the increased competition for some faculties, particularly faculties like medicine and law and certainly competition for graduate school as well and various jobs in the economy as a whole. Students are buckling down to work on their academic subjects and for grades, in a way which I haven't seen for some time. This has positive aspects, but in the particular way it's coming about now, students are almost excluding from the consideration certain other serious political problems that have arisen because of this shortage of jobs and shortage of positions in professional and graduate faculties. Now if it turns into a political criticism of the present society, then I think we'll have some progress. But I fear at the moment that many of these students because of their own class background and because of their own interests and worries are being so bombarded by the present system, that their last place of refuge is going to be the textbook and their graduate record exams and so on.

Saidman: How about the SDU movement?

Leadbeater: Well, the SDU movement is a movement which has petered out, in many ways unfortunately, at the University of Alberta. I think the SDU movement did much in its time. I didn't always agree with everything it did at the time and I, in retrospect, wouldn't agree with many of the things it did even now. I do think that they raised a lot of serious political issues and for people like myself, it advanced in many ways our thinking on certain issues and forced us to consider alternative means of dealing with the problems that our university and society faced. I think that it had problems with leadership cults, and problems with groupies and democracy and so on. But as a whole, as a reaction against a trend in the university, I think it was progressive and promising in its time. What we need now is something which is broader based, more serious and more democratic within the university; something which has many, many, many more adherents and many, many, many more connections within the community, within the trade union movement, and in the progressive movement, with the cooperatives and so on.

Saidman: To wrap it up, Dave, do you still have that large, colour poster of Pierre Elliot Trudeau hanging up in your office?

Leadbeater: I was never happy with the Liberal party, and I regret supremely that I ever associated myself with it. It was a mistake I made on the basis of political naivete. It was that there was a certain kind of idealism that I had which went something like this: I was influenced by Pearson and the United Nations Association in peacekeeping and so on, and it was on that basis that I got involved with the Liberal party and I thought that if it could do good things on the international scene, which incidentally I'm not even sure were that good always, it could do those things domestically as well. And I was wrong. I was plain and simply quite silly to believe that. I found that the Liberal party is not a very democratic institution, that anyone who wanted serious progress would be a voice crying in the wilderness. But above all this, I found out that the political party operates in an ideological and political framework which is antagonistic to the interests of working people. And I've always been interested in sort of helping people who are the underdogs in some sense, and it seems to me that the Liberal party is not a party of underdogs, and I just cringe everytime I think of the fact that I once, for a brief period, was a member. After joining the Liberal party, I did, though, do a serious self-criticism and reexamination and I don't think I'll ever make as grotesque an error as that again.



election campaign 1969, from the 1969 Yearbook