

GATEWAY features

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This University sends student delegates to national study conferences of various kinds.

Upon returning, as part of their debt to Students' Union (who foot the bill), they are supposed to report on their experiences.

This year, Gateway news editor John J. Barr represented Alberta at the Sir George Williams University Conference on foreign aid, Nov. 5-9.

But he hasn't returned to air the same pleasant platitudes we're accustomed to hearing from delegates. He thinks there is something seriously wrong with the whole conference system. Read on, and see what.

By John Jay Barr

We students are spending more than \$1,000 of our money annually sending delegates to national student conferences.

I wonder if we're getting our money's worth.

I have attended two such conferences—at Laval U in Quebec in November, 1962, and at Sir George Williams U, in Montreal last November and so I speak from some experience.

This is a report on the Sir George Williams conference. But it is also a brief inquiry into the present policy of sending student delegates to conferences of any kind. I hope to ask some pointed questions.

"UNPRESTIGIOUS COLLEGE"

"Aspects of International Aid" was the topic, and the conference got under way Nov. 5, at Sir George Williams University—a smallish and rather unprestigious college associated with the Montreal YMCA and located in a drab downtown building, the residence of which looks out on the back of

a laundry-flying tenement.

I soon discovered why the Conference is not held in the highest regard elsewhere in Canada: it is sloppily organized.

The speakers, with a few exceptions, were boring, pedantic, little-known spokesmen for the status quo.

The delegates were a motley crew. At least half of them, for reasons of unpreparedness or unqualification, had little to contribute to the discussion. You don't think, normally, of English students as being experts on foreign aid programs.

GLOPPY SLUSH

The food was, for two meals out of three, a gloopy slush ladled out of the University's own cafeteria kitchens.

The longest and driest speeches were inevitably planned so as to run from after supper (when, with a full stomach, you were beginning to feel pleasantly loggy) until late at night.

The worst speakers were inevitably saved for the late evenings. I have fond memories of a Belgian economist with a thick accent reading—I said *reading*—a 20-page treatise on some obscure aspect of aid planning, while a companion and I took turns keeping awake.

I only recall two worthwhile speakers in the entire five days. One, Andrew Kamarck, was an official of the World Bank. He gave a cogent, and highly provocative, argument for the channelling of economic-development funds through international agencies.

Kamarck was the only speaker in the entire period who impressed me with his practical wisdom, political acumen, and personal dedication. The various academics from the Montreal area whom the organizing committee drafted as speakers had views essentially the same as Kamarck's—that is, they too favored "no political strings attached" aid programs co-ordinated impartially by teams of international administrators.

FEW PREPARED

But few of them were prepared, as Kamarck was, to admit of the existence of such unpleasant but inescapable realities as the cold war, or demagogic Afro-Asian politicians.

The second figure who caught my eye, for the sheer boldness and audacity of his ideas, was Robert Theobald, a free-lance American economist who argued that in light of the so-called "cybernetic revolution," every working American ought to have a guaranteed annual wage of \$5,000, and every Burmese jungle ought to have its own "automated, cybernated," factory!

I didn't quite catch the logic of his recommendations—but they sure were colorful.

FIVE DAYS OF RAIN

Well, the Conference was five days of Montreal rain (colder than Vancouver rain, I found), delicious Montreal café-food, and rather discouragingly platitudinous discussion, in which little was said that anyone couldn't have anticipated (i.e., "two-thirds of the world goes to bed hungry every night," "the industrial nations must help industrialize the emerging nations," "there is nothing more evil, when giving aid, than trying to attach political strings,"—i.e., than asking the nice Afro-Asians please don't swear allegiance to the U.S.S.R.??)

I got on my plane, and flew home, still wondering: if the Sir George Williams U Conference is typical of such affairs, is it worthwhile to be sending, (at considerable cost), student delegates to them? This Sir George Williams Conference probably isn't typical—so why should we send delegates to it??

I really have my doubts about how much anyone learns at these affairs.

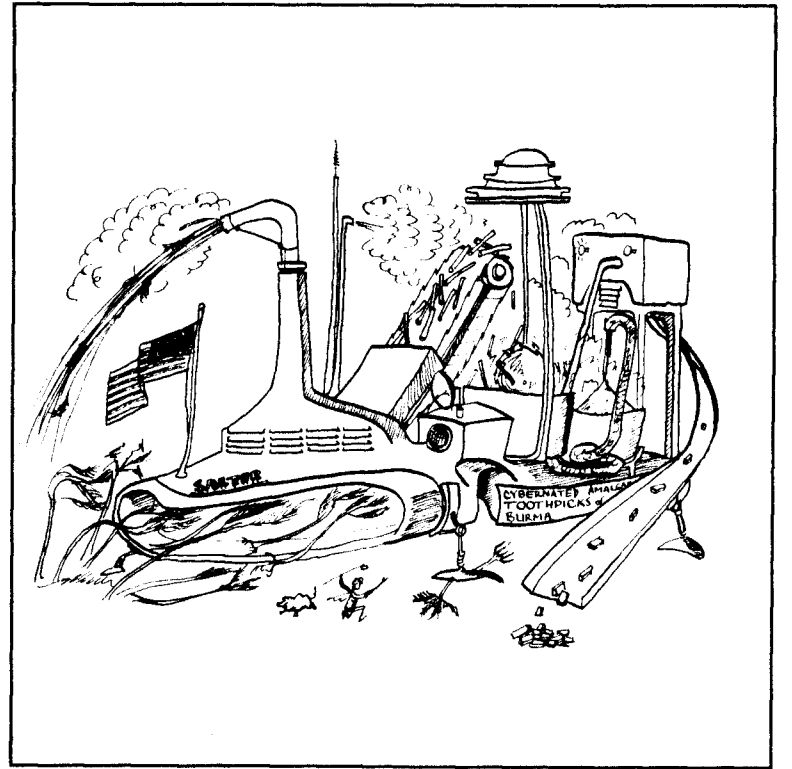
REASON BANISHED

Politics, in my experience, is a highly-ideologized affair. Political discussions, among partisans especially, soon break down along ideological lines. Sweet reason is banished to the rear as soon as the verbal lead starts flying.

On the first conference day, discussion is eminently rational and reasonable. Especially when you deal with generalities. (We all take a strong stand on behalf of motherhood and against sin!)

By noon of the second day, the slogan-shouting has begun. The attack has turned against black-hearted reaction. Peace, Progress, and Socialism are on the march. Resolutions supporting peaceful coexistence and damning South Africa (never mind that the Conference has nothing to do

Should Delegates Be Sent To Student Conferences?



RECOMMENDATION OF WEEK: AUTOMATIC FACTORIES IN BURMESE JUNGLE??

with South Africa) are drafted, and passed—with few dissenters.

There is a lot less interchange of opinion and exchange of ideas at these affairs than anyone on the outside begins to realize.

The problem is, the delegates selected are all too often ideologues: they come with their ideas pretty firmly preconceived. Once arrived, they seek out and band together with their fellows, and from there on discussion tends to assume a *bloc*, rather than an individualist, character.

JUSTIFY CONFERENCES

So we're right back at home plate. How do you justify conferences?

Sure, they're fun. Free travel. Places to see. People to meet. Spirits to be consumed. But is that what we—we students, remember, *not* the taxpayers, because we finance these trips through the Students' Union—are paying more than \$1,000 a year for?

O.K., some conferences can be more easily justified than others. The university has to be represented at some prestigious functions—the university's image on other campuses, and with other students, is conditioned somewhat by the impressions U of A delegates leave behind.

RECONSIDER COMMITMENTS

I suggest, for the sake of argument, that the Students' Council strongly reconsider its commitments in terms of student conferences. I suggest a re-evaluation of the present scheme, with an eye towards the policy that student money will not be spent on "marginal" conferences. In view of the apathetic response of students to calls for delegates to these conferences, I suggest much better advance publicity for conference applications.

If no one with credentials applies, no one should be sent.

Our selection program isn't as bad as some universities', heaven knows—we haven't yet, to my knowledge, sent any pharmacists to conferences on banking—but it could be improved.

Above all, we need to avoid the present expedient of letting things slip until the last minute, and then getting on the phone (figuratively) to some prominent campus figure, to ask him to represent the university.

TRAINING GROUND

Campus figures are great, knowledgeable, erudite. But conferences should be a training ground for many bright young minds—of whom there are plenty, of whom few ever seem to apply for such conferences, presumably because they feel they don't have a chance. Every year, the same old faces.

My final message: Conference-attending has become a nice little bureaucratic sinecure around this campus. For too many people, for too many years, it has been a means of hitching free rides around the country, a device for getting a free vacation in mid-winter. I think we should be sending more delegates—qualified, variegated delegates—to fewer, and better, conferences.

Everyone, save the beneficiaries of the sterile old program—stands to benefit.

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TYPICAL CONFERENCE DELEGATES:
"A MOTLEY CREW"?