

Ottawa anniversary orgy of arrogance and apathy

How the CFS birthday party turned into a funeral feast

by Jeff Harrington

Canadian University Press

OTTAWA — Trudging toward the hallowed halls of Parliament on a brisk Sunday morning, a shudder of wisdom rises from my stomach and escapes my lips: too much Scotch, too little sleep and way too much Egg McMuffin an unhappy reporter make.

Turning left down Metcalfe St., I'm already half an hour late, late for an important date. Another bastion of democracy had just wound up its annual general meeting, that treasured 10-year-old baby, the Canadian Federation of Students.

And what a birthday party it had been. Two hundred and fifty delegates, representing over 400,000 Canadian students, got together for seven days and nights to chart a course for the next six months. They wound up beating each other with the compass.

It's 10:30 a.m. and I'm half an hour late for the post-mortem, the only meeting of the 14-member CFS national executive until January. I hate being late for meetings: everyone looks at you funny as if you shouldn't be there, they whisper "fucking reporter" and other compliments.

But CFS makes it easy for me. As I traipse into the empty meeting room, Kelly Lamrock, who had been re-elected as chair of CFS the day before, looks up from his piles of reports. He doesn't look too happy to see me.

"It'll be pretty boring stuff today...I don't think anyone is in the mood to discuss anything controversial," he mutters.

I nip upstairs to the federation suite to make a phone call, pause to survey an officescape of beer bottles and swollen ashtrays, and elevator back down. Kelly — cross Ronald Reagan with Yogi Bear and you get the picture — lumbers upstairs to start making wake-up calls to the Skyline Hotel, five blocks away.

The only other person there is Kevin Wood, the new graduate student rep on the national executive.

"I guess we're not going to start until after lunch," he says. "I've only been to one other general meeting — it wasn't quite so vicious, people weren't attacking one another."

At 1:15 p.m., the meeting finally begins, with nine of 14 national executive members present and accounted for.

CFS IS THE LATEST ATTEMPT at harnessing the energy of what passes for a student movement in Canada. Formed in October 1981 by the National Union of Students, the Association of Student Councils (Canada) and five provincial student federations, CFS now has 70 members, including the York Federation of Students, and a \$1.5 million budget.

If you're a full-time York student, your tuition sends three dollars a year to CFS and one dollar to CFS-Services, which runs the travel agency Travel CUTS, the Student Work Abroad Program (SWAP) and the Studentsaver discount program. CFS also provides a computer network for student unions, a health and dental plan and an international student card for budget-minded travellers.

On a political plane, it runs campus campaigns on education policy and social issues such as racism and AIDS awareness. Perhaps most importantly — or so its

constitution goes — CFS lobbies the federal government "with one united voice" on behalf of Canadian students.

Redundant rhetoric aside, CFS' "ultimate aim" of a high-quality post-secondary system that is accessible to all sounds just hunky-dory. But any success CFS has had — and that isn't much — in getting its message across has come despite general meetings seemingly designed to be as divisive as possible.

Nov. 4, 2 p.m. The delegates file into a large hall for opening plenary, the first of two sessions in which motions are (sometimes) debated and then voted on. Many of them are clutching translation devices and each delegation has a giant white or yellow voting card with their school's name on it.

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The student press contingent is spied by Marcella Munro, one of the Carleton delegates and a member of the "left caucus."

"Ah, the press," she sniffs. "Those who can't do, write."

Ah, Marcella, and those who do, do doo-doo. Resigned to my fate, I continue scrawling away in my diary. Some entries, cleaned up of course for the sake of coherence:

- the first motion of any substance to hit the plenary floor highlights the rift between the left- and right-wing delegates: the ratification of Calgary's DeVry Institute of Technology, a private vocational school, as a prospective member. The left wants a committee to discuss the implications of admitting CFS' first non-publicly-funded member. But the right wants to vote immediately and defeats the suggestion 28-21. DeVry is then accepted by an overwhelming majority
- University of Ottawa student Marc Molgat is trying to chair the plenary, but his grasp of Robert's Rules of Order is tenuous at best. He refers to amendments as motions, allows debate on non-debatable motions, calls for discussion on motions which haven't been sponsored by two schools, and calls for votes on amended motions without telling delegates what they're voting on. He gets an A for effort, but he's out to lunch in both official languages
- dinner looms and the time set aside to question the national executive is cut short
- after dinner, plenary starts assigning motions to 12 different committees for further discussion. Of 172 motions, 100 are left over from the "semi-annual" meeting in May. Twenty-four of those are from the meeting before that
- the translators are supposed to stop working at 9 p.m., but agree to work half an hour longer, extending the session into time reserved for graduate students to meet. The

grads move to adjourn the meeting, but the motion fails and they walk out. Motions not referred to committees will have to wait until next spring.

Nov. 5, 5 a.m. Hotel staff discover alcohol missing from a kitchen fridge, and hotel management go to the room of Nicolas Plourde, president of the Federation Etudiante Universitaire du Quebec. Later that morning, a woman in his room is arrested by Ottawa police and charged with theft under \$1000. (Plourde later tells the *McGill Daily* he met two women in a bar in Hull, Que. and invited them back to a party in his room.)

On each of the next two days, the delegates have a morning provincial meeting and then break up into the so-called "special interest groups" the right wing claims are taking over the organization. The six groups — francophones, international students, students with disabilities, aboriginal students, students of colour and lesbian, gay and bisexual students — are allotted three hours over two days to discuss issues that concern them. Women and graduate students also have time slots during the week.

There are no seminars at this general meeting, student politicians having little to learn. At the last meeting, few bothered showing up. Instead, the delegates are herded onto the 12 standing committees that, in an ideal world, would get all the work done. On planet CFS, however, they maximize efficiency with committees that average 20 members, including staff and national executive members who act as resource people.

"The budget committee room was like an oversized sauna," as treasurer Lyndon Surjik later described it.

Surjik himself feels much of the heat that day, thanks to a \$67,000 discrepancy between CFS figures on membership fees and the auditor's report. Rumours of an impeachment motion and secret backroom meetings swirl through the conference.

An Acadia University delegate demands his resignation as the committee begins its work, but Surjik refuses. He instead asks deputy chair Allison Lewis to run the committee and goes over the membership fee receipts one by one in an attempt to convince the members the budget is legit.

The right-wing schools opposed to Surjik walk out of the meeting, which continues until 9 a.m. the next morning.

Nov. 7, 8:30 a.m. CFS Chair Kelly Lamrock cancels a three-hour lobby session with MPs from all three parties after only 40 delegates get out of bed.

At two in the afternoon, a workshop on CFS' history and founding principles is already half an hour late. As people trickle into the room, no effort is made to speed things up.

CFS has hired professional mediators from Catalyst Research to facilitate what under normal circumstances might be a bloody war on the plenary floor.

"I know this week has been quite frustrating for all of you, but this will be fun and inspiring, whether you like it or not," says Catalyst's Lynne Tyler in a soothing tone.

She takes all the fun out of it by telling the delegates they can't in-

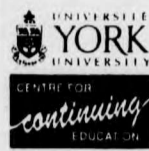
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