

Alternate Student Government — No. 1 priority

Last week the Gazette published a critique of the present unrepresentative student government at Dalhousie and in its place we suggested one possible alternative. Our assertion that the present system of government is both inadequate and unrepresentative of Dalhousie students is hardly a contentious issue since all serious members of this year's Council are the first to admit it.

The question that must now be resolved is not whether change in the structure of student government is desirable, as it most obviously is, but how this change may be achieved, when it will be achieved, and in whose interests it will be achieved.

Since the concept of a representative Dalhousie Student Council first came into being, it has undergone only slight modification. As it presently exists, the Student Council represents only those members who take it seriously enough to attend Council meetings regularly and speak on behalf of themselves and their friends (a small proportion of the actual Council members). Even the more dedicated Council people realize that it is impossible to represent all their constituents. As MacDougall told the Gazette recently, "theoretically I'm supposed to represent the whims and desires of 2,400 students. Practically this is impossible."

WHO WILL CREATE CHANGE

Assuming that change will come about in the Student Union given these circumstances, the next logical step is who will create this change. Two groups essentially can make this change — the student body or the Student Council.

The present committee for Alternative Student Government is exploring some of the possible ways Council can either be reformed or scrapped entirely.

REFORM

In order for the Dalhousie Student Council to achieve any semblance of credibility in its structure, one thing is a must — a well-developed line of communication between the students and their representatives.

One possible way of achieving a meaningful two-way dialogue between students and their reps would be to break up such large faculties as Arts and Sciences into smaller categories. Thus instead of electing four people to represent 2,400 students, each department would be represented by a single student elected from that department.

The question then arises: who represents those students who do not belong to any departmental society such as the Soc Course Union or the History Club?

Other reforms this Committee might also consider are the working relationships between Council members and the Executive. In the GAZETTE installment of "Notes from the Underground", several members complained that members of the Student Union Executive hold all the power in the Union. While it is undoubtedly true that Brian Smith and his Executive hold more than their share of power, this seems to be primarily the fault of members for abdicating many of their duties and responsibilities.

Before quitting her position as Nursing rep on Council Chris Novelli told the GAZETTE:

"Council members are apathetic with regard to representing student interests. Often they consider themselves above doing menial work."

In view of these statements, is it any wonder that

student council is often labelled the "Rubberstamp" of the Executive?

Many of the rules and regulations designed to ensure adequate representation of Dal students are flagrantly abused by certain reps. One of these regulations is that which says, in order to remain on Council members must attend at least one Council meeting in every three. Judging from the number of times Council has barely had enough members for a quorum (2/3 of all members), it is easy to see why this regulation was needed.

One favourite trick of reps is to show up at meetings just long enough for their names to be taken by the recording secretary — after that they disappear. Undoubtedly the reason why many members take such pains to remain on Council is for the goodies available to them. This ruling that allows free access to all Union-sponsored events should be re-examined, and if it is not abolished altogether, certain restrictions must be placed on their free ride.

SCRAP COUNCIL?

Peter Dwyer (Arts rep) told GAZETTE that Council in any shape or form cannot be relevant to the issues affecting students and should therefore be abolished. Chris Novelli went one step further in her criticism: "The whole Council is for the birds. It must be scrapped and something new started... It can't be reformed."

While it is highly unlikely the reps would voluntarily relinquish their power, there are many people who feel that Council, is beyond reform.

In an interview with GAZETTE, Tim Matthews, head of the Committee for Alternate Student Government, stated the purpose is "to find out what is wrong with the present system of government." Matthews plans to have open public hearings on this topic so individuals or groups will have a chance to present their views. While Matthews hopes to present the Committee's recommendations before elections are held in February, the Committee has yet to call its first formal meeting. Also, in order for any major constitutional changes to be approved, a mass meeting of students must be called to ratify such changes.

In view of the fact that change within the Student Union, as suggested by the Task Force, is impossible without first creating meaningful change in student government, then the next step is obvious. Alternate government should be the priority. And if council is unwilling to change itself through this committee, then the other body capable of doing it — the student body — will make its own changes.

CORRECTION

We wish to correct a statement attributed to Council President Brian Smith made in this space last week about the Nova Scotia Association of Student Unions. It said the primary purpose of the Association is to get more money for the university from the provincial government. While undoubtedly this will be one of the aims, the Association plans to involve itself in many other areas of student concern. The constitution of the Association states:

"The purpose of the Association shall be to defend and advance the interests of post-secondary students in Nova Scotia.

"To provide a means of communication through which member unions may improve and maintain the quality of their internal operation.

"To provide a means through which members may:

- a) determine areas of mutual concern;
- b) formulate solutions of the defined problem areas;
- c) to pursue the common good when negotiating with federal and provincial levels of government."

Smith was also quoted as saying that students do not need more reps on the university decision-making bodies. He did say that we do not need more reps if they are going to be as ineffective as they have been in the past.

Undergrads deserve relevant education

How can anyone consider themselves knowledgeable or any institution consider their job done, when students, upon leaving this university don't know the functioning of their own bodies nor the laws of their province or country?

There seems, of late, to be a breakdown of the "traditional" professional monopolies of knowledge and their consequent mandate of flagrantly high fees. The rise of quasi-medicals in the United States; semi-professionals in the legal field in Nova Scotia and Canada, as well as the current battle now won by denturists in four Canadian provinces, seems to point to a new trend, which manifests the belief of society, that medical treatment and the knowledge of one's legal rights no longer are regarded as luxuries but as necessities.

Universities rather than being vocational training

centers have traditionally sought to provide a liberal education. The role of the university as seen by Henry Hicks "is to educate, to provide information, and to disseminate it throughout the community."

A few decades ago, a high-school diploma entailed basic courses in health and civics; today's equivalent B.A. and B.Sc. graduate can claim no more.

Perhaps it is time that the university, especially one such as Dalhousie, which places such importance on its graduate schools, began to provide some knowledge in the form of courses highly relevant to everyday living.

Could not basic courses in health (medicine, dentistry and pharmacy) and law be offered to undergraduate students?

Marci Landry-Milton

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Editor: Glenn Wanamaker 424-2507

Advertising and Business Manager:
Marg Bezanson 424-2507

General Calls: 424-2350
Room 334 — Student Union Building