

EDITORIAL

The hypocrisy of activism

The problem with this editorial is that it assumes we care about the struggles of people other than ourselves.

If we believe in activism, we must believe in the legitimacy of every effort to achieve basic human rights. We should not stand as hypocrites, battling for our own special grievances with a loud shout, while simultaneously protecting our own vested interests or turning away if something does not concern us directly. This is the problem with activism. It is usually too splintered and too topic-specific.

Abortion, gender neutrality, anti-racism, free speech, self-determination, the environment, etc. . . . there are so many special interest groups (SIGs) in any given population that no majority can resist them — unless these groups stand apart from each other. Albeit they sometimes do, especially when gun control coalitions meet the NRA for friendly debate.

Looking to less extreme cases, however, it would be easier for SIGs to achieve their specific goals if they stood united. Unfortunately, "minority" groups usually don't consolidate; they try and hack out conflicts against an intangible "majority" on their own. Often one group forgets that the next day, it may become part of the silent majority that another group has to fight against.

Case in point, if we support the right of a woman to a safe abortion, then we may finance, protest and lobby on this issue. But, we might stop cold when it comes to gay and lesbian rights, because of a false belief that gays can fight their own battle or that their struggle doesn't necessarily concern us. But it does. Activism should not be cut and dried into tidy, separate packages. We should see the connexions. If we never support a "minority" issue until our own special case comes up, we too will lack solidarity and have to take on a Goliath.

As students we live in a time when our government has virtually abandoned the concept of accessible public education and has instead moved toward capitalizing it into a profit-g geared mechanism. Hopefully, we remember it is this same institution which is lagging behind the environmental concerns of Canadians. In this case, activism can be harmonious: students can lobby Queen's Park by joining OFS and simultaneously lobby Ontario Hydro by joining Greenpeace.

It's hard to believe, but activists who have championed the principle of free expression have also tried to silence ideas they find hostile. One of the struggles of early feminists was to appropriate their own feelings of sexuality; the bikini was one of their greatest victories. Yet today, some feminists will argue the genie should be stuffed back in the bottle, that open sexuality has led to sexual exploitation. One generation's push for freedom becomes another's push for restriction. Therefore, evils such as erotica (often labelled as pornography) have to be eliminated, severely curtailed or, at the very least, "monitored" (censorship under a nicer name).

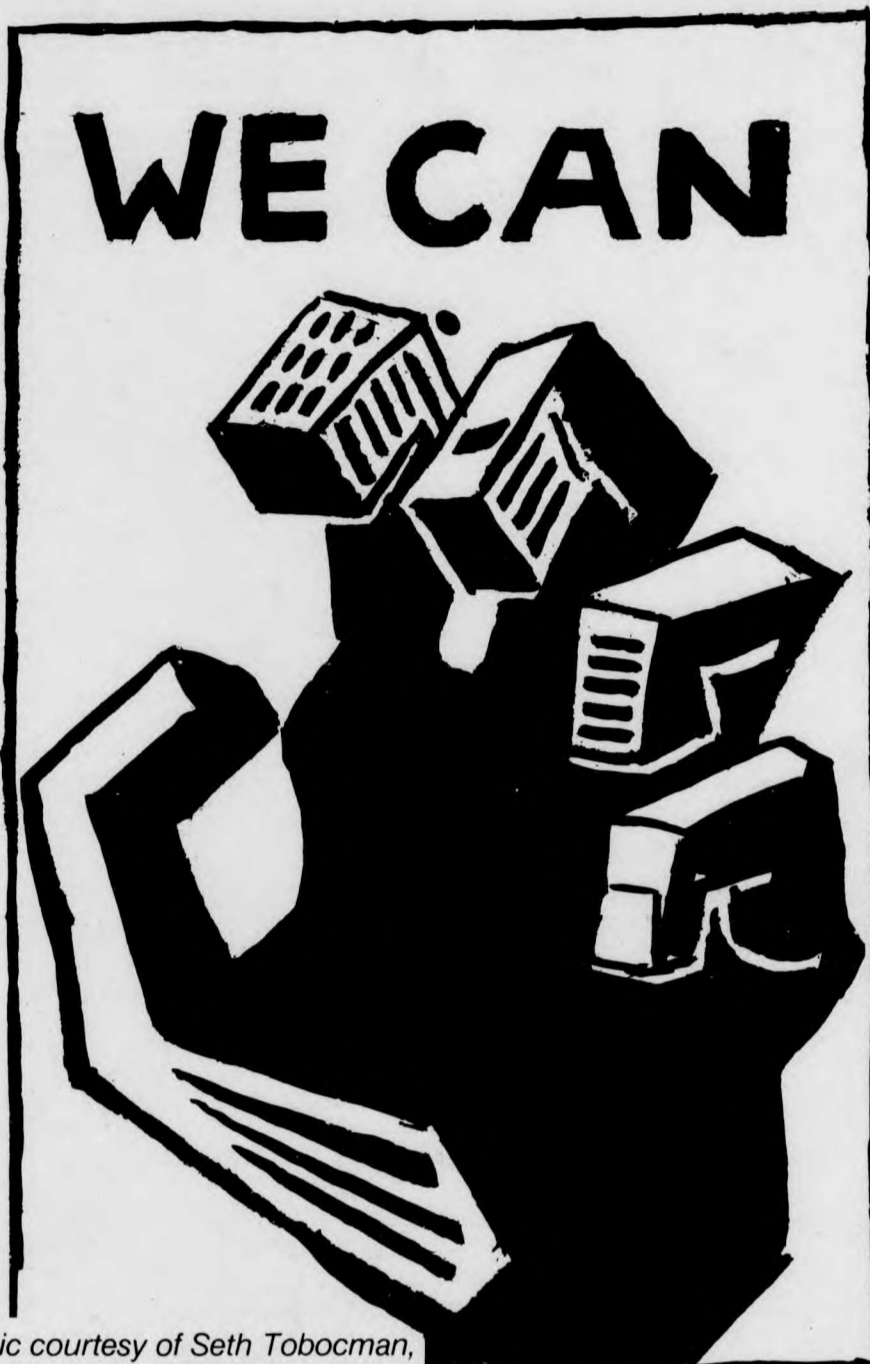
In the late 30s, during the racist offensive on Jews in Nazi Germany, the U.S. "human rights democracy" accepted only a meagre number of Jewish refugees. Where was the brotherhood, the universal compassion? Considering the Americans helped to finance what was to become Germany's war effort, perhaps it got lost in looking out for number one.

And now, do the Palestinians' demands for justice and a negotiated peace in Gaza and the West Bank deserve any less of our sympathy and fraternity? Is it kosher for a previously oppressed group to act out a calculated oppression of its own: shutting down universities, requiring pass books, and denying Palestinians a homeland while Israel secures its own?

And, with Mandela's visit and the media's recent attention on South Africa's apartheid structure, how quickly do we as Canadians make the necessary connexion to our own systematic racism against aboriginal peoples? Before Elijah Harper stood up in Manitoba's parliament, how many of us considered these native groups during the Meech Lake fiasco?

The mass media is hot on an issue for a time, then leaves it when other, hotter news comes along. Meanwhile the struggle continues. Of course, it seems like things are resolved because we aren't reminded of them — ignorance is sheltered happiness. But if we insist on rights, then we must be consistent.

A friend of mine has a strict policy: he doesn't watch TV, doesn't read newspapers, doesn't listen to radio and doesn't get into political debates. Obviously, he's not an activist, but he's not a hypocrite either.



graphic courtesy of Seth Tobocman,
World War III illustrated

LETTERS

Excalibur welcomes letters to the editor on all topics. We will publish, space permitting, letters up to 500 word in length. They must be typed, double spaced, and accompanied by the writer's name, signature and telephone number. The opinions expressed belong to the writers and do not necessarily reflect those of Excalibur staff or directors. However, letters judged to be racist, sexist or libellous by the editor will be refused. All material is subject to editing. All submissions must be addressed to the Editor-in-chief, Room 111, Central Square.

York President defends his position on apartheid divestment

To the editor,

You have seriously misrepresented my record and York's on South Africa. In doing so, you have injured my reputation and that of the university. I am writing to set the record straight.

1. Shortly after becoming president, in 1985, I instructed the relevant administrative officers of the university to divest all South African investments held by York. This was done promptly.

2. The York University Pension Fund, which is controlled by an independent board of trustees, did at that time hold a small portfolio of such investments. I asked the administration's representatives (who comprise a minority on the board of trustees) to work for divestment. My position was supported by the university's Board of Governors. It was also supported by the trustees representing the employee groups whose members are beneficiaries of the fund.

3. However, as the law then stood, pension trustees did not have the legal power to divest for political reasons. I wrote to the Attorney General of Ontario asking that the

law be changed, and in due course it was. While we were waiting for the legislative amendment, with my support, the Secretary of the board of trustees arranged to divest to the extent that they lawfully could. The Board of Governors and employee representatives also supported this position, and further divestment occurred.

4. When the Trustees Act was amended to permit complete divestment, the board of trustees promptly took the required poll of beneficiaries in order to authorize this action. I am happy to say that the necessary authorization was received, and the investment managers of the investment fund were instructed to get rid of the stock.

5. We believed that this had been done. Then, early this spring, we discovered that full divestment had not yet occurred. This was a clearly unsatisfactory response to the instructions given to the investment managers. At my request, and with the support of the board of trustees, the Secretary of the fund then instructed the investment managers to get rid of all offending stock immediately

and completely. This was done within a matter of weeks after discovering the problem.

In addition to the board of pension trustees, and the Board of Governors, I have worked closely with a number of faculty members and students involved in the campaign against apartheid. There has not been, to the best of my knowledge, any moment when we have had real disagreement. As a result, York has been in the forefront of universities in Canada and elsewhere on this issue.

These facts are all easily ascertainable. In failing to check them, or in willfully disregarding them, you abandoned your duty as a journalist, as well as the simple obligation that we all have to tell the truth.

I expect the next issue of Excalibur to carry a full and complete apology, signed by you, and a correction of the record which is given prominence equal to that of the original story, which appeared — oddly — under the heading of "News."

Sincerely,
H.W. Arthurs
President

EXCALIBUR

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Cover Photo Jason Nolan
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EDITORIAL: 736-5239
TYPESETTING: 736-5240
ADVERTISING: 736-5238

MAILING ADDRESS:
Room 111, Central Square
York University
4700 Keele Street
Downsview M3J 1P3