

Conservatism: What's the sound

FEATURE
by Brian Howlett
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Conservatism on campus. It has become a catch-all phrase for describing university life in the '80s. Many people compare the modern campus with its counterpart of the '60s, which has been labeled the decade of radicalism. But radicalism and conservatism are only buzzwords, and as such fall short of conveying an accurate understanding of students of both decades. It is impossible to evaluate an era that has just begun but perhaps some light may be shed on the attitudes and motivation of modern day students by understanding their earlier counterparts.

On April 3, 1970, 300 students gathered in the council chambers of McMaster University's Gilmour Hall to protest food condition in on-campus cafeterias.

Led by a group called the McMaster Students Movement, the students proposed a set of demands designed to guarantee better food and working conditions.

These proposals met with an unfavorable response from the administration, the news reached the students that files had been moved from the administration offices to a locked room in the basement of Gilmour Hall in anticipation of a sit-in.

At 5 pm. that afternoon, the administration's fears were realized when 50 students took over the president's office, beginning what is now referred to as the 'food strike.'

By Monday a steady stream of students, professors and workers visited the occupied office in an unprecedented show of support. That evening an agreement was reached between the university and the students.

On Jan. 13, 1982, 200 students collected in the council chambers of Gilmour Hall to block the passage of proposed changes to the business program. In a rare display of unity, students

The familiar tactics of the 60's—building take-overs, strikes and demonstrations.

argued they were not informed of the changes when they applied and registered at McMaster. They said the restructuring of the program should be postponed for a year so they could remain unaffected. However, the Senate overwhelmingly voted in favor of the proposal to despecialize the program.

Disappointed students filed out of the chambers and reorganized themselves to determine further action. After 28 days of lobbying senate members and circulating petitions, the students succeeded in overturning the decision.

Both situations are examples of students attempting to assert their rights in the face of administration opposition. In the former, students took immediate action; in the latter they elected to follow more conventional channels. The two different courses of action reveal significant traits concerning the era each took place.

The familiar tactics of the '60s — building take-overs, strikes and demonstrations have been replaced by litigation and tactics ranging from lobbying and grievance procedures to educating the public and fellow students.

These are activities more attuned to the current era, when students see less justification

for violence, interruption of classes or even demonstrations on campus.

In the space of one decade, student attitudes have undergone drastic changes. In the '60s, campuses across the western world were labelled 'radical' by a frightened and confused establishment. This tended to exaggerate a new way of thinking. While many campuses, such as

rejection of the university, the United States and the Viet Nam war."

The Viet Nam crisis was one of the most important factors in the disillusionment of young people with society. As television pictures daily relayed graphic images of the atrocities being committed in a war that nobody understood, North American students reacted.

Today, students no longer want to change the world. They're more pragmatic and realistic.

Ohio's Kent State, witnessed uprisings of more than 10,000 students, the radical element was still a vocal minority.

The McMaster Student Movement received little student support until the issue of cafeteria food arose in 1970. Until that incident student activism was the exception rather than the rule.

Students in Canada, London, Rome, Paris, and Tokyo joined U.S. students on Oct. 15, 1969 in a moratorium on the war. Demonstrations, marches and sit-ins arrested normal campus activity as students desperately fought for an end to the conflict.

"Students in the '60s didn't like what they saw and wanted to change things," said Lawson.



But history tells us that it is the actions of a few rather than the many that initiates change and influences thought. Such was the case in the '60s.

The success of the McMaster Student Movement signalled the impending realization that formal structures were no longer a viable force in the realm of student reform. Students saw they could do things their own way. Growing confidence in their own abilities coincided with growing mistrust of the establishment.

David Lawson, a member of the McMaster Counselling Centre, was an undergraduate studying sociology at McMaster in the late 60s.

"The food strike was a result of a specific issue, as was the last year's actions over the business program changes," he said. "But the difference lies in that the food strike was also part of a broader range of issues. It was a

"They really believed they could change the world. They were naive and idealistic.

"Today, students no longer want to change the world. They're more pragmatic and realistic. They want to be a part of society.

"In the '60s we thought there was something wrong with people going into engineering, law and business. These disciplines were viewed as being part of the capitalist society against which we were rebelling," said Lawson.

According to Alvin Lee, McMaster administration president, students today are more concerned with getting a job than changing society.

"Students have almost a professional attitude to their studies," he said. "There is a big swing to professional programs today, whereas in the '60s business was almost a dirty word to students."

The *Financial Post*, a bastion of pin stripes and capitalism, is enjoying its highest subscription rate on Canadian campuses ever. More than 21,000 students currently subscribe to the *Post*.

"In the '60s there was a global paroxysm of social movement and revolutionary expressionism," Lee said. "There was a great deal up for grabs. Now things are much quieter. Students desire to be not enemies of society, but active members."

Part of this desire to conform rather than confront stems from the realization that jobs are not as plentiful as they once were. Students of the '60s didn't have to worry about getting a job upon graduation. Today, the restricted job market has produced a more competitive atmosphere on campus.

When undergraduates were asked by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1969 what they wanted to get out of their education, they ranked learning to get along with people first and formulating values and goals for their lives second.

By 1976 these aims had been replaced by getting a detailed grasp of a special field and obtaining training skills for an occupation. Top among the reasons new students give for attending university today is getting a better job.

Aren Geisterfer, a member of McMaster's Chaplain's Office, has counselled students since the mid-'60s at the University of British Columbia, Western Ontario, Waterloo and McMaster. He says students today are less certain of their future.

"Students are just as anti-establishment today as they were in the '60s," he said, "but now they need the government and big business. They are more cautious in expressing opposition because they realize these bad times are staying."

"Today there is constant change in all facets of life, including employment, nuclear warfare and culture," he said.

"The only certainty is uncertainty. Students ask themselves, 'Will I make it or not?' The realities of life are such they have to be more conservative. They have to prepare for difficulties. There is nothing to fall back on so they have to be more careful."

Concern with Viet Nam, civil rights and campus rules for students...have passed.

Lawson referred to a theory that states a person's attitudes are formulated during adolescence. Students of the '60s grew up in a prosperous era when the economy was healthy and the government was honest. Their idealism is more understandable in this light.

On the other hand modern day students grew up in an era stained by Watergate and the Viet Nam war. The impact was profoundly negative. According to a U.S. magazine, *Change*, today's undergraduates are estranged from the political process and cynical about civic life as a result.

Between 1969 and 1979, the percentage of students who considered it essential to keep up with political affairs dropped from 51 per cent to 38 per cent.

Concern with Viet Nam, civil rights and campus rules for student conduct — issues that dominated the '60s — have passed. Current students list tuition fees, institutional facilities and staff firing and hiring as their prime concerns.

This growing self-concern manifests itself in all aspects of student life. A survey taken in 1981 shows students are twice as sexually active as students were in 1969.

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