

Gripes, Schmipes...

EVERYBODY'S A CRITIC

By Bruce Gillis

The events at the recent council meeting regarding the budget compelled me to do some serious thinking about the direction council seemed to be taking this year. I began to wonder exactly what council members and others saw as the role of the council, of the president, of the executive, and of the students at Dalhousie in the job of making the union a workable and beneficial one. I wondered mostly whether many council members had ever thought about this question, because it seemed apparent to me that they hadn't.

The whole situation was brought to a head when the members of the council voted to cut the budgetary appropriation for salaries for hired personnel in the SUB from \$33,000 to one dollar. This in spite of the fact that it would probably mean losing a large part of our staff and destroying completely the morale of the others. The motives given by these members are really not the issue that I take exception to. It was the lack of forethought, insight, personal knowledge, and the generally slap-happy attitude towards the business of the union which appalled me.

I get a distinct impression that many council members think that what their office entails is a groovy little game, where, theoretical solutions are found for theoretical problems, and the one who forces his view wins the game. It would be nice if this were true. Then we could be a neat Monday night debating group.

But the fact is that our problems are very real and any solution which is to be effective must be much more than theoretical. It has to work, and all the ramifications of any change must be weighed before it is made. In some cases this can be easily done. In most it is extremely difficult and time consuming. The work involved in being a council member is increasing at a fantastic rate, and not enough council members are accepting this.

Council is much more than a meeting each Monday. In fact most people who have been to council meetings, including the members, will probably agree

that the meetings are the most dismal part of council business.

If this is so it is not a failing in the structure or the process. It is a failing among the members. If they wish to see meetings become more productive or more interesting, they should be prepared to discuss things and contribute to the agenda. They should be making themselves aware of the facts involved in issues that arise by asking people about them. And this does not mean listening to uninformed rumours - it means going to the source and getting the real facts.

The SUB has become one of the greatest rumour factories in the continent, rivalling, it seems, Washington itself. At one time we used to have a rumour of the week. Now we have them issuing every thirty seconds. I get tired of answering irate people who approach me in the council office or the cafeteria or the halls or the lounge or the council meetings with questions that begin "told me..." or "I heard that..." or "What's this about..." and challenge me to refute what they have said. I refuse to waste my time refuting nonsense. If anything has been done which affects them, it will be reported to council. I don't have any obligation or intention of going farther than that, especially when the present situation exists.

I think also that the job of the president requires some definition. It has been said by some of the less active members of council that the president should lead the council. These same people say that the council should not be swayed by the president but should direct him in his duties. While these two points of view do not have to be mutually contradictory, they are impossible to follow in the way they are being argued - as principles which are both inviolable.

It may surprise some people to know that the largest part of the president's time is not spent preparing for council meetings. It is spent looking after the day to day operation of the union - the letters, complaints, meetings, conferences, telephone calls, tele-

grams, appointments, and a host of other unclassifiable little duties. Much of the burden can be shifted at times to the other members of the executive. But because the president is the ultimate authority when council is not in session, it is his job to make sure that everything is handled smoothly and properly. So he must deal with many of these things himself, even though it is in conjunction with other executive members.

At the same time, the president is responsible for all permanent staff members, and so must deal with problems that arise there personally - an area which no other student has to contend with. Added to this the president must work on legislative programmes for the council and concern himself with government lobbying, media aid, outside organizations relations with other universities, campus spirit, and the position of Dalhousie as a whole (not just the students) When he has some time left he is supposed to prepare for council meetings, try to keep council members informed of all the things that are happening, accommodate the campus press and keep some sort of direct contacts with the members of the student body. He must also try to attend some classes and do some studying.

Considering this, it is not surprising to me that some strong criticisms arise as to council efficiency. Any fool can see that things need attention.

What amazes me is that people seem to think that members of the executive are either not aware of these things or are ignoring them, and that the critics seldom take the trouble to ask a few questions to find out what is being done, and why. A truly constructive critic checks the facts and details at all sources before sounding off. This is not a party system of government where the cabinet is pitted against the loyal opposition. It is a council of members with similar aims and interests, and a spirit of co-operation is necessary.

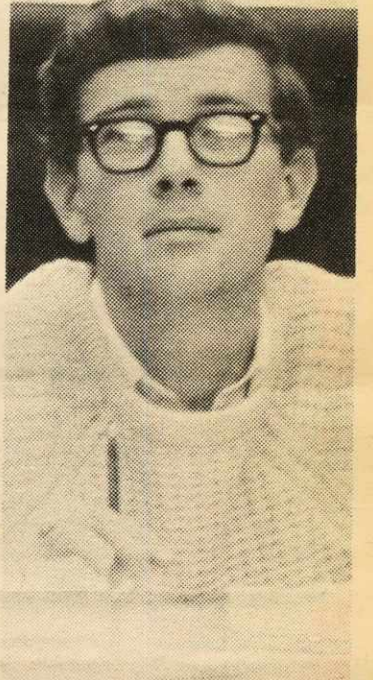
Many of the critics are conspicuously absent from the council offices during the week, and many are devoid of constructive suggestions. I would like to appeal to these people by saying that improvements are more likely to be effective if they take more than a passing interest each week in order to take some pot shots at Council meetings. We need people who are willing to devote some time to these areas. The executive shouldn't try to do it all, and really doesn't want to.

The passing of the budget was one of the most telling indications. The schedules were passed in record time, with scarcely a question raised. Aside from the fiasco about the salaries of our employees, which is a tale in itself, the debate (?) made me wonder if council has achieved a full awareness of its responsibility. I would be very surprised if more than half a dozen people had even read through the budget enough to have a good working knowledge of it. But councillors voted in favour of schedule after of schedule of student funds running into hundreds of thousands of dollars. This is a frightening indication. Some have accused the executive of irresponsibility, but I would like to impress upon them that it is this same council which makes all major decisions.

Council members must realize that it isn't a game they are playing. They are every one involved in very real and crucial politics, with all the connotations that word implies. We must all face

up to that fact and govern ourselves accordingly.

I intend to lift some of the burden from council by holding more executive meetings, where, hopefully, many of the minor problems can be fully, many of the minor problems can be solved without using council's time. This should make council meetings much more effective, and allow for fuller debate and shorter meetings. I am hopeful that an improvement will be evident therefrom.



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