

Olley optimistic about deficit-ridden CFS

By MURIEL DRAAISMA

When 23-year-old Beth Olley tries to dream of the future of the Canadian student movement, she cups her hands together to form an imaginary crystal ball.

Peering into the space she has created, Olley smiles confidently. As the chair of the Canadian Federation of Students, she is optimistic the organization will pull itself through another year despite a deficit she estimates to be about \$70,000.

Olley is determined to bring a measure of financial stability to the organization. By paying close attention to budget details and drawing more students into the CFS fold, Olley hopes to set the federation back on its financial feet.

But her face grows more serious as she remembers another problem facing CFS—criticism from traditional supporters of student movements about the federation's purpose and direction. Much of it has been centred on Olley herself.

Many delegates at the November general-meeting at which she was elected said they felt the vote in her favor indicated CFS is turning conservative. Said her opponent, Anne Travers from Guelph University: "(Olley's victory) was clearly the result of a left-right split that went on for the whole conference."

Former student union president

at the University of Saskatchewan, Olley had a hand in the killing of the campus women's directorate and the setting up of a committee designed to review complaints about the university newspaper, the Sheaf.

After her election, Olley said many people would consider her student council "right wing to fascist," but she now maintains she is "left of centre."

"Fuck, I'm no fascist," she said in a Sept. 11 interview in her cluttered office in Ottawa. Her face growing flushed, Olley insisted she was not among the council members who objected to the directorate's political nature and its abortion counselling service.

Olley said the student union locked the directorate's doors because it did not provide enough services for women on campus and had repeatedly turned away women wanting to become involved.

"It's unfortunate that the service we had to cut was a women's centre. But it had nothing to do with the issues people like to run on about. It was shut down because you could say, it wasn't political enough. It wasn't doing anything."

The U of S student union created a review committee of the Sheaf in a bid to investigate complaints, especially from engineering students, about the newspaper's off-campus coverage, Olley added. After the committee was set up,

council made no attempt to restrict the paper's funding or autonomy, she said.

"None of my past says I'm either right or left wing," she added. "I think some of the things that student council did last year and what was misrepresented in the student media should not have an impact on how people perceive me. I hoped it wouldn't. But it obviously has."

The CFS chair argued she is just as committed to student activism as were the two people preceding her. The first CFS chair, Brenda Côté, led a dramatic one-week occupation at the Université de Moncton administration building in protest of a massive tuition fee increase. Graham Dowdell, the second chair, was also elected for his left-leaning stance.

Olley pointed to a year ago when she drew her student council together in a fight against a reduction of campus library hours. After extensive lobbying through media interviews and a petition signed by 2,000 students, the university administration backed off. The library hours cut back were reinstated within a week, she said.

"When we talk about student issues, I'm certainly consistent with everyone else here. I would say I'm a little left of centre."

Running her hand through her hair, Olley denied CFS chose her over Travers, a well-known student activist, because the organization is not willing to fight militantly for students' rights.

Although she admitted the federation seeks out issues which only affect Canadian students, largely ignoring the plight of the country's less privileged groups, Olley said CFS is still committed to combining its lobbying efforts with more direct action to achieve its ends.

Olley argued students are grow-

ing tired of traditional forms of protest such as demonstrations and occupations. They want more sophisticated means of conveying their anger, she said.

"We can be just as effective and get our message across to the government by plugging up their phone lines instead of marching up to the Parliament buildings. I think activism is just changing in its nature."

Olley added the federation must grapple with its financial problems before it can reach out to the needs of groups not actively involved in CFS.

The organization has already staved off some of the deficit, which was estimated to be nearing \$96,000 in the spring. Olley, however, did not elaborate on how the debt was reduced by \$26,000 in such a short time period.

Delegates at the May general-meeting vowed to stick to a financial plan ensuring the organization runs yearly surpluses for the next few years. Olley said if all goes according to plan, the deficit will eventually disappear.

One cost-saving measure delegates agreed on is the delay in hiring an accessibility researcher, a position that became vacant in June and will remain so until January. The move, however, will only save about \$6,000 because of unforeseen costs such as benefits.

Another step taken by delegates to save money is the decision to simplify the federation's bureaucratic structure. Central committee members and the CFS board of directors for its services—both of which ensure CFS staff follow mandates set at the general-meeting—will be integrated into one executive this fall. Details of the amalgamation will be hashed out at the upcoming general-meeting in November.

The move may save the federation as much as \$28,000 but Olley said the position of deputy chair, needed to help her coordinate the executive's meetings, will probably eat up the savings.

The federation will likely be bolstered by unanticipated membership fees from campuses pledging to join, claims Olley. Yet CFS—which won only 10 of 16 referenda last year, losing two traditional supporters, Trent and Guelph Universities—faces six more referenda this fall, including Brandon University, Queen's and the University of B.C.

"We're hoping to have just as good a year as last year. I think we're a lot healthier than we have been. We've been thinking about our debt and have come up with plans that we think will work—that's head and tails above what was done in the past."

Olley hopes prospective members will be attracted to the federation's campaign focusing on the failure of provincial governments to pass on the federal transfer payments aimed at post-secondary education.

Applauding the campaign's theme of guaranteed tied funding, Olley and the general-meeting delegates vowed to lobby the new government with letters and the results of a public opinion poll in October on post-secondary education.

Olley will be personally involved in chatting with politicians and with her pragmatism and crystal ball in hand, CFS may well live long enough to see the Tory broom respond. □

Muriel Draaisma is the national bureau chief for Canadian University Press.

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