

President's Choice: the interview

Jean Ghomeshi, president of York Federation of Students

by Peter Stathis

In brief, what is your background?

I'm a fifth year political science history double major, and a woman studies minor. I've always been interested in politics on campus and off campus. Activism is something I've been drawn to whether it's in the performance field or on campus — you know entertainment, the York New Democrats, the Pro-Choice Network.

What are your outside interests and activities?

I'm a political junkie and a musician, particularly musical theatre. My life is, and has been for awhile, a paradox between academia and musical theatre. I originally came to York for theatre. I ended up in political science and history. I've always wanted to be a political science prof and study the political economy of the media and/or Middle Eastern politics. At the same time, I'm still very active in musical theatre. Because I'm so interested in these two significantly separate areas, I've always felt like a jack-of-various trades, master of nothing. It's difficult because I feel if I just chose something and went with it, I could be really good at it. I fear that I'm just waffling around with the aforementioned paradox.

What is the idea of a university in your opinion?

A place for discourse, a place of information, a place for community, but most of all the beacon of change. I would say that where every change has happened around the world, the university has always been the focus. That's why, when there's a revolution, the first thing they do is close the universities because that's where change manifests.

How does York fulfil or neglect this mandate?

Well, generally, quite poorly. But I don't think that that's specific or unique to York itself. In fact, York is a little more on the edge of change.

What conservatism means is an idea of a university as a place for people to enter, told what they need to be told, and then leave with a piece of paper that will help in the "real world." This is compounded by the notion of a university being a business which manufactures consent among students. This ethos is not too far off the way that York functions right now, but I want to make it clear this is not a York-centred problem. At the risk of some ludicrous patriotism, we are better than other campuses in the sense that there are many interesting and new ideas coming out of York.

Do you feel responsible for York in all regards? Where does your connection end?

I happen to like York, and some of the people here and even some of the buildings. I have a stake in defending and addressing concerns that are brought up at York. I believe people have a responsibility to be active and to change things or to address issues that they have problems with.

My community is York university right now so I talk about administration making undemocratic decisions, or the styrofoam in the cafeteria or racism on campus, but that doesn't end at York. Wherever I am, I'd like to work at that community and addressing the same sort of concerns.

Should there be censorship at a place where people come for the free exchange of ideas?

No. I don't believe there should be censorship. There should be jurisdiction, I think there should be broad guidelines around libelous statements and around hate literature and things that offend the public good. I wouldn't censor somebody for something in the halls, but if that person is inciting people to kill each other, then that's a different question, right? In terms of censorship in general, however, absolutely not. What there should be though is a strong enough community to address what people may find offensive or difficult.

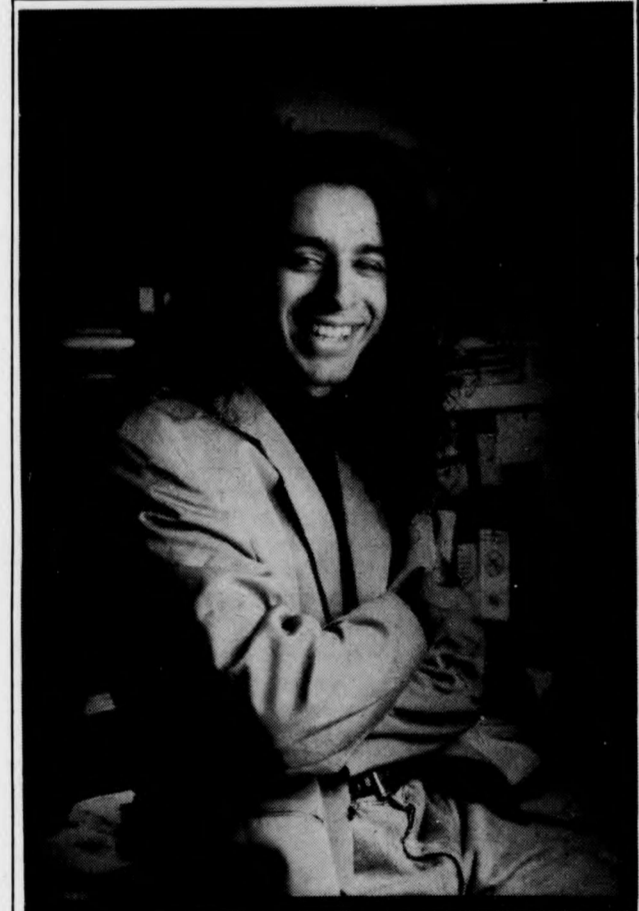
What do you see as the mandate of a university newspaper?

To be challenging, to provide a critical analysis of decisions made at the university that affect students, to allow a forum for dissenting opinion and to keep a check on those who wield the power at the university. It should also expose the

unfair or what the newspaper may perceive as anti-democratic decisions that are made by those in power.

Do you believe there's a credibility gap between students and administration here at York? If so, what are the solutions?

There are a lot of people who disagree with me, but I think students would generally be foolish to trust the administration. The administration is not what they purport to be.



Andre Souroujon photo

There are many out there that think we're completely out of line, that this is some sort of leftist revolution and that student government has no place making the kind of decisions we're making. I think that's untrue.

There are many other interests that they serve, be they business interests, corporate interest, and/or the interest of those who wield the power to make decisions. We are the best people to make decisions about ourselves. We are the best people also to judge what we may consider to be unfair.

The solution is that students need to mobilize opinion, we need to start informing each other as students and with the campus press.

The faculty has a union, so does the staff. I think that as students need a strong collective voice also.

I don't think we need to go into every meeting as enemies, but I think we need to fundamentally realize our interests are not always the same.

How can York continue to be accessible to students in light of the provincial government's financial negligence?

I think that this is an area that once again York is not alone in. Government underfunding is affecting universities all across the country and accessibility to education is being jeopardized by increases in tuition, lack of appropriate government assistance programmes, and systemic and institutional discrimination.

One place where Harry Arthurs and I completely agree is that we think that the provincial and federal governments, through transfer payments, should be putting more money into post-secondary education.

What we disagree with is not only our tactics on how we're going to regain that funding, but on how it should manifest itself in terms of accessibility to education. We're not just talking about funding from the government to York, we're also talking about how York uses the funds that it gets.

Harry Arthurs and I met several weeks ago at which point I suggested that he take out a full page advertisement that both of us can sign, students and administration working together calling for a freeze on tuition fees. He said he didn't believe in a freeze in tuition fees and I argued that there is a correlation between tuition and accessibility to education. He disagreed. There are two students, our former equality commissioner and the person who is going to be our bilingualism coordinator this year, who both had to leave York because of the cost of education. That's directly correlated to the cost of tuition.

President Arthurs says tuition has nothing to do with accessibility and we're going to spend thousands of dollars building an entry pavilion so that York students know how to get into the Ross building. We're talking about aesthetics and image and that's money not well spent.

What will be your focus in the upcoming year?

Making changes within the YFS and also with the role of student government in this university. Providing more information and asking more questions. Building broad-based coalitions (Clubs Coalition, Envision York), opening funding and recognition to all groups on campus for the first time, including political clubs this year. Generally distributing the budget so that it works in the interests of all students. Taking money out of things such as the president's discretionary fund and putting it into places like the Women's Centre. And trying to get people talking about real issues like racism and sexism on campus, and the environment which student government in the past at York have not addressed.

There are many out there that think we're completely out of line, that this is some sort of leftist revolution and that student government has no place making the kind of decisions we're making. I think that's untrue. We're doing what we should be doing instead of planning parties and spending money in areas that don't benefit real student issues.

Finally, where is York and Canadian post-secondary education headed in the next decade?

I have noticed a shift in people's thinking (people in the outside community) about York. Back when I was in high school, York was a joke in many cases, but I get a sense that this has really changed. York is finally beginning to get the credit it deserves as an academic institution.

I worry that too much of the administration's time and resources are concentrated on our image and putting York on the map. I would sooner concentrate on the basis of what York was founded on an open and accessible education and a place that encourages freedom of expression.

The decade of the 80s was the decade of academia based not around general education, but around preparing people for business careers. I came here that's what it's all about.

But I see things are changing. Ideas in society in general, people are moving away slightly from the ethos of the 80s — the emphasis on self and monetary solutions to happiness.

Five years ago when I entered York, it was the peak of cynicism about liberal education, but I see that changing. As a lifelong cynic, I'm optimistic.

by Peter Stathis

In brief, what is your background?

I'm a law professor. I started teaching at Osgoode in 1961 before Osgoode was part of York. I was one of the principle people that brought Osgoode onto the York campus. I was dean of the law school from 1972-77 and my whole career has been that of an academic.

What are your outside interests and activities?

You mean there is something outside the university? Whatever they are, this is a job that takes 110 per cent of whatever you are prepared to give.

I spend all of my working time on the university and what's left over is invested in my family life.

I love to go to movies.

I try to keep up my general reading — novels, history — that sort of thing. All those outside activities have shrunk to the time I can give them.

What is the idea of a university in your opinion?

From the perspective of the student, the university is a place where education is available. Even that immediately breaks down because some people have a very focused view of their education. It's their ticket to economic advancement or social advancement. Others have a more open-ended, liberal view of their education and it has something to do with whatever exposures they've had prior to coming here, different images of the university defining their expectations.

Secondly, from the perspective of faculty people, they see themselves, of course as purveyors of knowledge and the intellectual skills that enable people to use knowledge. They also see themselves as generators of knowledge. It is a place where knowledge is stored and is also produced. That creative element is very important.

Most people say the university is supported by public funds and should be responsive to public needs. There's some truth in that, but I think it's also a problematic position.

In a certain sense, the university serves the public best by doing what universities do in the long run, which is to focus on the education of the students.

Attempting to respond to short term expedient requirements as the guiding principle for a university would be a mistake.

My job as the president is to try to harmonize what is legitimate in all these positions. Obviously the students are being radically short changed if they don't get a good education.

Likewise, if the faculty members couldn't pursue their creative ambitions we just couldn't attract good faculty.

How does York fulfil or neglect this mandate?

I think different parts at different moments of time are reasonably fulfilled.

We take our teaching responsibilities fairly seriously. I wouldn't argue for a moment that every instructor at every hour is superb, that would be unreasonable. I think people do care about their teaching by and large. We try to invest considerable resources in improving the quality of teaching.

On the research side, I would say our record is up and down. For a period of time we were struggling to establish ourselves. However, in the last few years, the atmosphere of York as a research institute has improved considerably.

When people identify universities which are the engines of the economic and technological process, York isn't too often on the list.

I think any serious university tries to have adequate representation of all branches of human knowledge so that serious intellectual exchange will occur.

York's very small scientific community needs to be bolstered, and is in the process of being bolstered. I think over a period of time, we will have a profile, a distribution of disciplines which more nearly resembles that of most universities.

Do you feel responsible for York in all regards? Where does your connection end?

If the question is, am I responsible until I go to the grave, the answer is no. My position runs until 1994.

While I'm in office, I will certainly give it all I've got. I've deliberately avoided becoming involved in other activities, professionally or scholarly. I just try to retain a little respect

Harry Arthurs, president of York University

as a scholar, it's very hard to do and I just don't get involved in outside activities. The time I have I give to the university.

Should there be censorship at a place where people come for the free exchange of ideas?

No. I've never believed in censorship.

I've been a very active civil-libertarian in my time, president of the Civil Liberties Association of Canada, and I find it very difficult placing myself in the position of being a censor. I hope there are other ways we can fight racism and

interest to take a position that is predictably anti-administration.

Issues should be approached on their merits, when we do things that are wrong we should be criticized, when we do things that are right, we should get congratulated and supported.

Do you believe there is a credibility gap between students and administration here at York? If so, what are the solutions?

I think that at any university, students are naturally skeptical about the administration.

First of all, if they weren't, they wouldn't learn the first lesson of being students which is to always ask questions, to be skeptical and never take on faith what is given to you.

Secondly, I think most students would not have comprehensive knowledge of most issues. They only have a knowledge that comes to them via the media.

Students only know what they read in the papers, like anybody else, and what they read in the papers is partial. You can't expect to be comprehensive.

Students don't have a long historical memory, that is to say people who were present at certain events, even a year or two ago, may well have graduated. The people now expressing the students' perspective wouldn't know the background except in unusual circumstances.

I do believe very strongly that major academic policy issues should be publically ventilated, with full information and support. Other issues and forums should be equally ventilated. I try to operate in that fashion.

How can York continue to be accessible to students in light of provincial government's financial negligence?

For the past 15 years, universities have dropped lower and lower as a percentage of provincial spending. Compared to all the other provinces in Canada, Ontario does worse even though it's the richest. The decision was made to cut back on universities as a priority. The result of this is that accessibility has been maintained right up to today, but quality has gone down.

Essentially you're spending less money on more people, less per capita. This causes a deterioration of everything from faculty-student ratios, to books in the library, to quality of the equipment we work on in the lab; the list goes on and on.

York, more than any university in the province, has borne the brunt of accessibility. Between 1975 and 1985, we have taken a third to a half of the expansion of the system. In 1985 when I became president, we only received 80 cents for every dollar that other Ontario universities got, for example, a second year history student. The government has maintained its verbal commitment to accessibility but it is trying to discourage it.

As a result of a rational argument and a good deal of foot stamping, we managed to move 80 up to 90 cents. Various other things have brought it up to 93-94 cents. We are now engaged with other universities to bring it up to a dollar. The justice of the case is inarguable.

What will be your focus for the upcoming year?

I've got three or four things that are quite important. First of all we've got a very big construction programme. I would like to complete the buildings we've got and implement our master plan.

In the area of academic planning, we've just gone through a very important cycle in taking those plans out and implementing them.

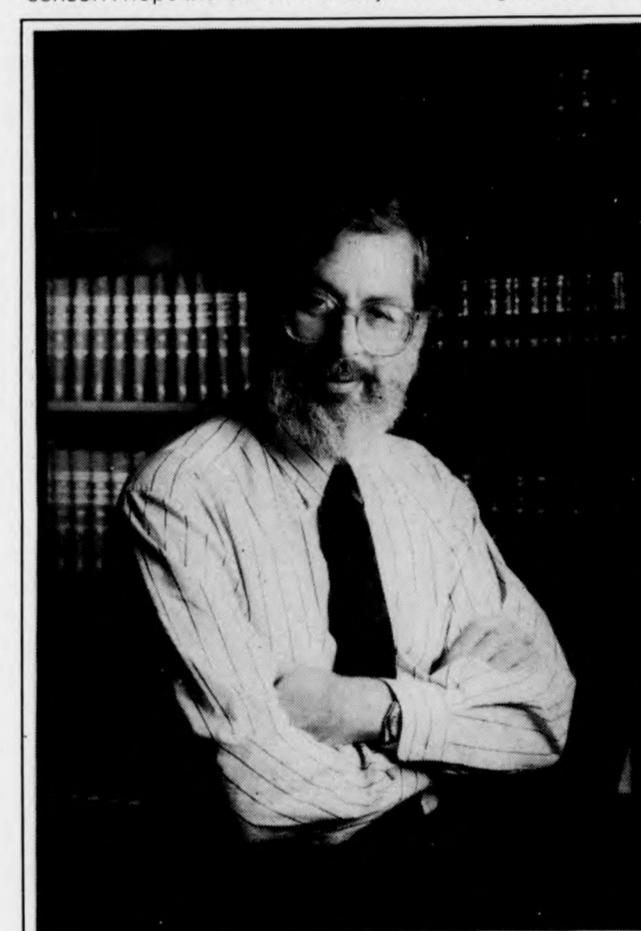
Associated with that, I've been working on a first draft of a discussion paper which will be coming out this fall and will be widely exposed for comment.

Finally, where is York and Canadian post-secondary education heading in the next decade?

I have to see York in terms of the big picture.

I would say a year ago, we were approaching a turnaround point for higher education: we had sunk as low as we could go and sooner or later someone would get the message and our fortunes would rise. I'm less confident of that now.

Sooner or later it will happen, but I don't know when. These are very cyclical issues. We ride largely with the system. If the system as a whole flourishes, we will be a part of that flourishing. If the system withers, we will wither with it.



Andre Souroujon photo

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sexism without being at odds with the basic notion of free discourse which characterizes a university.

What do you see as the mandate of a university newspaper? I think the proprietor should define the mandate. From my perspective it's not a question of a mandate, it is a question of good professional journalism.

I hope that all journalists, in universities or elsewhere, will feel a professional obligation. That would be checking your facts, offering some opportunity for exposure of a variety of points of view.

Beyond that, I think we have to put ourselves in the hands of people who are prepared to exercise responsibility.

I certainly don't think it's your obligation to whip up enthusiasm for the administration, that's certainly not why you're in business. Equally, however, I don't think it's in your