

In a NUS-shell

by Brian Taylor

On October 9th the students of the University of Alberta will be asked to vote in a referendum. The referendum is over whether or not the Students' Union should become a member of the National Union of Students.

The National Union of Students (NUS) is an organisation devoted to representing Canadian students to the government and other bodies, an institution in which as of May, 1975 there were 20 members. Besides the U of A, the University of Calgary and the University of New Brunswick are also holding referendums this month to decide on their particular memberships.

Twice a year general meetings are held, with all member institutions attending, each member holding one vote. The results of these meetings are ratified in a mailout vote to each institution.

Each province elects a member to serve on the Central Committee. Besides these, there are also a treasurer and two members-at-large, elected by all members. The Central Committee is in charge of carrying out policy, organising the staff, and allocating funds, according to the elected priorities of the general membership.

There are also three staff members: an executive secretary who is in charge of the national office in Ottawa, is responsible for the coordination of programmes, and represents NUS to the government and other organisations; a research secretary who provides information to NUS and its members, and a fieldworker who travels to institutions across the country, assisting members, and helping non-members organise referendums to decide on joining NUS.

Reason for a "Yes" vote

One of those in favour of joining NUS is Brian Mason, vp (executive) of the Students' Union. After attending the NUS conference at Glendon College last May, Mason became convinced of the need for the U of A membership. A report was prepared and presented to the Students' Council in September which recommended that a referendum on membership in NUS be held October 9th.

NUS has three main objectives. The first of these is to provide research on issues of concern to students. Mason has pointed out that NUS has helped Alberta students on several occasions through information it has supplied.

The Federation of Alberta Students was recently set up, with NUS helping by

providing sample constitutions and documents from their files.

The second objective of NUS is to serve as a lobby organisation, representing student interests to the federal government and other national bodies. NUS is gaining acceptance with the government, and is slowly being recognized as a representative and national organisation, says Mason.

The final objective is to provide communication between the member institutions, as well as between the members and the national office and provincial organisations. The advantage of this was shown last summer when a NUS fieldworker helped the University of Lethbridge set up a housing registry, using information supplied by the U of A's own registry. The semi-annual conferences also give members (and non-members) a chance to rap together and discuss issues.

The issues that NUS has concerned itself with are the following:

- 1) The financing of post-secondary education.
- 2) The status of women students.
- 3) Housing.
- 4) Student employment.

In Mason's opinion, the argument that the first issue is a provincial matter rather than a federal one makes no sense.

"The Fiscal Arrangements Act grants from the federal government 50% of the cost of post-secondary education. It also limits annual increases to 15% per year. In a time of rampant inflation, this places a disproportionate burden on the provinces, causing cutbacks in educational spending. It also forces provinces to consider placing more of the cost on students, through loans. The Fiscal Arrangements Act will be renegotiated between the provinces and the federal government in 1977."

Obviously then, the federal government can and does make important decisions concerning student finances. A national body of students is necessary, says Mason, to try and arrange the best possible deal for us.

The same considerations must be taken in the fields of student housing, unemployment and the status of women students. These problems must be resolved both at the provincial and the dominion level.

"We have to deal with these things in a comprehensive fashion." Students' interests must be represented on three levels, in keeping with the federal system of our government. Local concerns are met on the local level (the university). Regional problems should be dealt with

on the provincial level, and national concerns by the national government, in Ottawa. We already have the Students' Union on the first level. The Federation of Alberta Students (FAS) was recently created to represent our interests to the province. Finally, NUS would be our national voice, if we joined it.

In conclusion then, Mason sees six advantages to joining NUS:

- 1) It will lobby the federal government on students' behalf and gain support for the student position among other pressure groups.
- 2) It will provide coordination and information to provincial and local student groups for their own lobbies.
- 3) It will provide for the education of students at the local level regarding the issues which affect them.
- 4) It will provide a basis for organising students towards dealing with their own problems.
- 5) It will improve continuity in student councils, through education of the student body.
- 6) It will reduce isolation by bringing a wider perspective to the trends and needs of students throughout Canada.

Arguments for a "No" vote

Leading the fight against NUS are two Student Council members, Rick Cooper (Arts) and Peter Drabble (Science).

In their view a national organisation is not necessary to take care of the four problem areas to which NUS has addressed itself. Financing of post-secondary education, for example, is a provincial responsibility. True enough, the federal government pays 50% of the province's costs, but this is done with no strings attached. The province sets the amount that it wishes to spend, and the dominion simply pays half of it. To lobby the state for more money would be useless, since the province determines the sum it needs.

Housing also is a provincial responsibility. The federal government can supply money to individuals through its various agencies and loan schemes, but these are of little value to students. Again, the provincial government is the body that needs to be lobbied.

It is rumoured periodically that there is discrimination against women students, particularly in the Faculties of Law and Medicine. This however is a matter that should be taken up with the individual faculties and the university by the Students' Union and Council. A

national organisation is not needed for this.

Finally, NUS can do little to help U of A students find jobs, according to Cooper and Drabble. Unemployment in Alberta is the lowest in Canada to start with, so we would be last on the list for anything. What is more, unemployment is a problem for everyone, all over Canada, and NUS would only be one small pressure group among many more effective ones, such as the Canadian Labour Congress.

Drabble and Cooper see FAS as an alternative to NUS. Since the major issues of concern for students lie within the provinces jurisdiction, according to the British North America Act, FAS would be able to work more effectively than NUS ever could. FAS could lobby the provincial government for such things as increased housing or changes in student loans policy, and get results from them.

If NUS really can do nothing, why should the Students' Union pay \$20,000 per year (\$1 per student) in order to be a member? FAS will also need anywhere between 50¢ and \$2 per student, which means that at least \$30,000 would be spent each year to belong to two organisations. Do the students of U of A need to pay this much, especially if one organisation is useless anyhow?

NUS has a tendency to get involved in issues which don't concern students. An example of this was at the Glendon Conference in Toronto last May, where a motion was passed in which NUS recognised "that there exists two nations (English Canada and French Canada) within the structure of Canadian federalism; and the right of self-determination of the people of Quebec." Consequently, the Association Nationale des Etudiants de Quebec was recognised as "a national organisation with the same status as NUS, and independent of NUS." This defeats the purpose of a National Union of Students, because if the vote is ratified, then there will be two "national" organisations.

Finally, the U of A would be under-represented at NUS. This is because large institutions, like the U of A, would have only one vote, the same as a smaller institution, like Cariboo College. Besides this, the eastern universities have the potential to outnumber the western ones (even though the west now has the majority).

In summary then, according to Peter Drabble and Rick Cooper FAS should be considered an alternative to NUS. NUS would be ineffective in dealing with the problems that concern students in Canada, and in representing the U of A.

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WPC

At the September 22nd meeting of the Women's Program Center, one of our members, who is actively involved in NUS, suggested that the WPC should formally declare its support of this organization with regard to the upcoming referendum. While many persons present were aware that NUS is concerned with the role of women in post-secondary education, we desired to know more specifically what advantages would accrue to all U of A students as a consequence of membership in NUS. Thus, we requested that a member of the U of A NUS Committee attend our subsequent meeting.

From the information transmitted by Terry Sharon of the NUS Committee it became apparent that NUS has been an effective lobbying force for its

members on issues which potentially affect every student. While students pursue their academic studies with varying degrees of seriousness, we think few students would want to have access to post-secondary education denied through lack of existent accommodation. Yet such factors as possible government cut backs in financial aid, inflationary living costs, rising tuition fees in some universities and rising student unemployment suggest that a university education may not be economically viable for an increasing number of students. NUS is currently actively involved in presenting the students' point of view on these issues.

Certainly the five issues with which NUS is currently concerned do not lend themselves to simplistic solutions. For this reason, NUS members are concerned with adequately researching their policies and proposals in order to provide a more effective lobbying voice for Canadian students. Since NUS appears prepared to effectively implement policies on issues important to all Canadian students,

the members of the WPC think that joining NUS would be beneficial to U of A students. This organization's policies affect us as students and a vote in favor of NUS gives us a voice in policy-making which we currently lack.

Carol Anderson
on behalf of the
Women's Program Center

NUS Committee

What will a \$1.00 investment in NUS bring to you?

Is there any value in the U of A students becoming voting members of NUS?

The National Union of Students is now working across Canada to mobilize the collective actions of students in a fight to give us a voice in the administration of post-secondary education. By increasing the awareness of students to the problems they have in common and the possible ways of solving these problems, NUS is coordinating a movement to help students help themselves.

The most effective pressure students can exert is in lobbying the government bodies which control the finances of education. A lobby at the federal level is of importance to students because the federal level supplies the dollars to the provincial governments. It would be naive to think that pressure applied to the federal government does not filter down to the provincial level. Interprovincial meetings of Education Ministers are not for fun and games, but rather to discuss the common problems of provincial education and to approach the federal government for support.

Students across Canada also need each other for support. The voice of one institution will not be heeded as will the voice of an organization representing 363,000 university students and 223,000 college students.

Of course we don't expect NUS to hand us the solutions to all our problems. You only get out of an organization what you put into it. By being a voting member we can bring our problems to NUS and solicit its resources and support to help

us solve them. As one of the larger universities in this country, our representation to NUS will bear a lot of influence.

The benefits of NUS will not stop when you graduate. The issues of NUS considered important at this time are important to all people beside students. Better housing, for students means better housing in the general community, especially for low income and fixed income groups. Student loans are paid off after you graduate. Any help you receive now relieves the load you will carry when you graduate.

If you believe that students have the right to fight for the improvement of their educational system, and that these improvements personally affect you, then cast a YES vote for NUS on Oct. 9.

Commies

The October 9 National Union of Students referendum marks a vital date for students