

# GATEWAY Features

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1964

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## Student Conferences - A Waste Of Time?

*This university sends student delegates to national student conferences of various kinds.*

*Upon returning, as part of their debt to the Students' Union (who foots the bill), they are supposed to report on their experiences.*

*From John J. Barr, graduate student, comes this general comment on student conferences, drawn from the weeks he spent at Laval University and Sir George Williams University, as a representative of this campus.*

By John J. Barr

The price of general student apathy on this campus comes high.

Last year, it cost the fee-paying students of this university at least \$1,000 in a seriously sick operation that produced very questionable results.



JOHN J. BARR

*I'm talking about the fiasco called National Student Conferences.*

Every year they're held, amidst great acclaim, by various universities, mostly eastern, to bring together Canadian and foreign students to discuss involved topics of current interest: separatism, nuclear disarmament, aid to "under-developed nations", international politics, ad infinitum.

### DELEGATES SENT

Most major Canadian universities—Alberta included—send delegates. The modes of selection vary. Some universities give great advance publicity to the holding of such conferences, and ask for—no, urge—the greatest possible number of applications from prospective student delegates.

*Our university doesn't — and that's my first complaint.*

In years past, there has been almost no adequate advance publicity here for the half-dozen or so conferences held. Knowledge of their being held has too

often been the property of a small elite in and around the Students' Union bureaucracy. Consequently, when the time came for applications from eligible students (in most cases that meant all students), few applications came. A small eligibility panel would screen the few applicants, and finger the lucky ones.

### SAME CIRCLE

The result was common, year after year: delegates tended to be drawn from the same narrow little circle of veteran conference-attenders.

Now our selection program isn't as bad as at some universities, heaven knows—we haven't yet, to my knowledge, sent any pharmacists to conferences on banking—but it could be improved.

Above all we need to avoid the present expedient of letting things slip until the last minute, and then getting on the phone (figuratively) to some prominent campus figure, to ask him to represent the university.

Campus figures are Great, Knowledgeable, Erudite. But conferences should be a training ground for many bright young minds—of whom there are plenty, of whom few ever seem to apply for such conferences, presumably because they feel they don't have a chance. Every year, the same old faces.



Now I suppose, here, someone could interject: "Sure, only a small group goes, year-in and year-out. But it's only that small group that has the qualifications, and the interest to go. The rest of the students—the mass of them—don't give a damn."

No, that won't wash. Granted, not every student is qualified to attend conferences of this sort. Who wants music majors on a conference on international aid? Who in the English department would be likely to contribute much to any conference on problems of trade? Quite undeniably, there are students who are much better off for not having applied. And there are those we wouldn't want representing our university at a conference.

### BUT THE OTHERS?

But what about the others—the highly-informed, fairly enthusiastic students, who would like to go, but who weren't properly informed in advance, or who received too little encouragement to apply? I know they exist, by the dozen, I've talked to them.

That's one problem, then: the way the mass of students here are paying the shot—easily in excess of \$1,000 yearly—to send a small group of other students to national and international conferences. There is, however, another.

*How much value are conferences, in themselves?*

I've attended two, for this university (there you are: *mea culpa*; I too am guilty of being in that small sinister group that always gets the breaks) and honestly, sometimes I wonder.

Both of the conferences I attended—at Laval University in Quebec City in November, 1962, and at Sir George Williams University in Montreal last November—exemplified some of the failures of all national student conferences everywhere.

### ON PAPER

Now, on paper, such conferences are supposed to bring together students of wide training and varied backgrounds, all of them equipped with independent critical powers, in order to discuss a



given set of political, economic or social problems.

According to the theory, the delegate is confronted with certain experts in the area, whose points of view should be varied, and provocative of real thinking and discussion.

In practice, I've found, the reality is quite something else.

There's that "free" discussion, for instance. Often what you get in its place is bloc-voting, and the railroading through of unrepresentative resolutions by well-prepared pressure groups. I've seen this happen, again and again—the form it typically takes is seen at every conference on economics or politics, where all the NDP delegates meet (I don't know how they sense each other out so quickly, although I do have an uncharitable theory), set up, behind closed doors, a plan of action, and then proceed to act as a well-organized platoon to shove through resolutions echoing the NDP line. They are, in a phrase, more concerned with action—partisan action—than with mere idle sterile discussion.

They aren't, of course, the only ones.

### NO REASON

Politics, in my experience, is a highly-ideologized affair. Political discussions, among partisans especially, soon break down along ideological lines. Sweet reason is banished to the rear as soon as the verbal lead starts flying.

On the first conference day, discussion is eminently rational and reasonable. Especially when you deal with generalities. (We all take a strong stand on behalf of motherhood and against sin.)

By noon of the second day, the slogan-shouting has begun. The attack has turned against Black-hearted Reaction. Peace, Progress, and Socialism are on the march. Resolutions supporting peaceful coexistence and damning South Africa (never mind that the Conference has nothing to do with South Africa) are drafted, and passed—with few dissenters.

There is a lot less interchange of opinion and exchange of ideas at these affairs than anyone on the outside begins to realize.

### ITCHY FINGERS

Conferences of this sort abound with flaming young ideologues,

and all too often they get their itchy little finger into the Conferences's organizational jampot in such a way as to slant things their way. Guest speakers, in particular, are often judiciously chosen so as to represent only one point of view, or one set of points of view. Everything is given a pre-selected bias.

It is true that any given individual national students' conference will contain elements of this within it, to some degree. Some conferences are quite well organized, and generally worthwhile—in this regard, I think of the McGill Conference on World Affairs, and the Laval Conference on Canadian Affairs. Unfortunately, there are plenty of poorer ones, most notably the Sir George Williams conference. And others.

### TWO QUESTIONS

And so I conclude with two questions, which I address to both Students' Council, and the Freshman Class: Are we doing all we can to get the best possible number, and variety of representative students from our university as our conference delegates? Shouldn't we ask ourselves whether some conferences are worth sending anyone to?

If we value the hard-earned money that we, as students, have to pay towards this inadequate program, year-in and year-out, perhaps we should demand some answers—and soon.

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