

WHY THE YFS SHOULD BE ABOLISHED

what exactly does it do?

by Doug Saunders

It's 9:30 pm and I'm fading fast. I've lost the drift of the argument taking place in front of me and I'm starting to feel agoraphobia in this oversized, over-clean chamber of polished marble and varnished birch. I want to crawl into a fetal position and avoid this humiliating spectacle, but I feel obliged to witness it, since it's sort of a historical event.

It's the second meeting the York Federation of Students — our central student government — has held since the beginning of the year.

Not that they haven't *scheduled* any meetings, mind you. Every three weeks, like clockwork, they book the chamber for a meeting. But hardly any councillors show up. They had to cancel every meeting between October and January because they couldn't reach quorum.

But they've finally reached quorum, and here I am.

And what a motley quorum it is: four or five guys in baseball caps — college representatives — along with a handful of confused-looking neophytes, most of them sneering and rolling their eyes at the front of the room.

At the front of the room, huddled in a protective semicircle and decked out in an interesting array of high-tech hairdos, is the executive — the president and three out of four vice-presidents. They look very uncomfortable.

The guys in the baseball caps, you see, have a motion on the floor. They want to order the executive to apologize for something they did in November. The executive went and held a referendum in November, on the Blue Cross health insurance policy (remember that?). And they held it without getting permission from the council. Therefore, the council is angry — the guys in baseball caps, at least.

"We couldn't get your permission because you never showed up to the meetings," an exasperated-looking Elissa Horscroft gesticulates. Horscroft is vice president of equality and social affairs. They had to hold the referendum because Blue Cross delivered an ultimatum, and there hadn't been a successful meeting for weeks so they couldn't ask permission.

The chair makes a ruling: whatever the case, the executive was in dereliction of duty. They have to apologize.

This whole argument takes about an hour and a half. The rest of the meeting is devoted to the executives reporting what they've done for the last three months, and the guys in baseball caps generally signalling their disapproval.

Something is very wrong, I think, as I stand up and pace around, my bum having fallen asleep. These people — the executives and the councillors of the YFS — are supposed to be a *government*. They have a half-million dollar budget and a gorgeous office suite, and they represent almost 30,000 undergrads. But



“ They have a half-million dollar budget and a gorgeous office suite, and they represent almost 30,000 undergrads. But they hate each other, they oppose any form of cooperation, they avoid meetings and most forms of communication—in short, they act as if they'd rather just abolish the whole thing. ”

they hate each other, they oppose any form of cooperation, they avoid meetings and most forms of communication — in short, they act as if they'd rather just abolish the whole thing.

And then it strikes me: *why don't they just abolish the whole thing?* Really, it might be better. The money could be better spent, and the human energy could be better expended.

Perhaps I should explain.

A big mess

Most healthy citizens spend a good part of their time bitching about the government. Whether it's the feds or the YFS, there's usually lots to bitch about.

But it's important to know what we're bitching about. Usually it's the current regime: the party in power, the Prime Minister, the students we voted into the YFS. And sometimes it's their individual acts, or policies, or even attitudes.

But sometimes it's more. When you step back and look at the whole system, when you examine its history back to the beginning, and you see people bitching about the same things all along — then you know something bigger is wrong.

At the YFS, something bigger is wrong.

Since its inception in 1968 (then it was called the YSC; later the CYSF), the fundamental nature of the YFS has changed little. It has grown, it has become richer, it has flip-flopped its politics a dozen times and bought computers and changed offices, but its basic purpose remains the same: it is a student politics club. It has a very limited scope. It doesn't have much of a role to play at York.

Which is to say: people have been complaining about the same things for 24 years. York student government has been run by idiots and visionaries, revolutionaries and reactionaries, communists and conservatives, jerks and jokers. But it doesn't matter: the YFS may be slightly better or worse at what it does, but *it doesn't really do much*.

But what does it do?

The YFS has 21 members, elected every March: the five executives plus two representatives from each regular college, one from Osgoode Hall Law School, one from Atkinson College and two from the Faculty of Education Student Association (more on this confusing blend later).

Sixteen of these members play a very minor role: they show up for meetings (or, more often than not,

they don't show up for meetings), and they vote on things at those meetings. Of course, there's no reason they can't do more than that, but they rarely do.

The other five are so busy they often can't take courses (which leads people to question the 'S' part of 'YFS'). They have salaries (\$13,000 to \$17,000 per year) spacious offices and seven or eight part-time and full-time employees and commissioners to run the office and generally do their bidding.

So here's what they do with their time: they give money to clubs and services (over \$110,000 this year). They provide information through campaigns and "awareness weeks." They publish course evaluations. They attend the conferences of big student groups (the Ontario Federation of Students and the Canadian Federation of Students). They lobby the administration. They represent students on administration committees. They organize protests against the administration and the provincial and federal governments. They inform students of political and economic happenings. They provide services (like health insurance). They organize social events (like the Reel and Screen film series). They help the colleges out with social events (like orientation). And they advertise themselves in any number of ways.

This is a lot of work, even for 21 people — and it's almost impossible for five, even with lots of office help. So not surprisingly, the YFS (and the CYSF before it) has never been able to pull it off. They are chronically understaffed. Most of their representatives do almost nothing.

That's not the worst of it. A more pessimistic interpretation — in other words, a more realistic interpretation — goes like this: there's five people trying to do work for 30,000 people. But 1) there's another 16 people trying to stop them from doing anything and 2) there's an endless mound of mindless administrative work that keeps them from doing anything new and 3) the students they represent don't have a clue what they're doing and 4) they have to work like crazy just to keep the whole thing from falling apart, and *that* kind of work doesn't do anything for us students. Not to mention 5) this whole thing is costing everyone half a million dollars a year.

An even more pessimistic interpretation — the *really* pessimistic one — goes like this: the YFS is a big machine which produces the YFS. A few other, more useful things might spew from its innards, but they're just side effects. Really, it's just a bunch of student politicians playing student politics with a bunch of student politicians. At a cost to us students, as I said, of almost half a million dollars.

This is probably too pessimistic. Yes, the YFS is a big machine and yes, it expends most of its energy just keeping itself running, but most students would like to see it get in gear. It's just that everyone's too busy steering to shift out of neutral.

So let's take a deep breath and look at what's really wrong with the YFS.

Nine things wrong with the YFS

1) **This strange lack of volunteers.** Any non-profit student organization like this has to be a volunteer-run organization. Take *Excalibur*, for example: imagine if the only people working on this newspaper were the dozen paid staff. It would be a two-page paper, and a mighty boring one at that.

Every year, hundreds of students sign up to do volunteer work with the YFS. There are people dying to get in there — either for their resumes, or for the political experience, or just for the social environment. But they don't get their calls returned. Why? The YFS executive members say they're too busy, and the rest of the councillors are never around.

2) Councillors don't get involved.

Lots of them *want* to get involved, and some of them try to. But there's nothing to do. They can go to meetings, and they can speak and argue and vote. They can drop by the office and hang out. They can try to sit on committees — but there aren't many committees. In fact, the executive is the most active committee in the place.

And, worse, lots of them do almost nothing (see table below) and that's perfectly fine. If you don't have a job to do, they can't blame you for not doing a job.

3) The colleges and the YFS hate each other.

An old problem — it was mentioned in the *Illiad*, I think — and probably the most serious problem. It goes something like this: Most of the council is composed of college representatives. Most of these college representatives will, if asked, claim their allegiance to their college council. College councils are largely devoted to the residence students in their own building, and see the YFS as an annoyance, at best, and at worst an adversary.

As a result, the YFS council meetings become occasions where the college representatives (remember those guys in baseball caps?) drag out a whole toolchest of spanners to chuck into the works. There are exceptions, of course — I've seen college reps who are selflessly devoted to the YFS and utterly impartial to their own college. But that's very rare.

I once had a conversation with a former Queen's University student pal who told me she thought the York arrangement was crazy. At Queens, she said, they avoid the whole competitive college scene and have a cooperative system instead: the councillors work together with the executives to get things done — as opposed to York, where they work against the executive to get things stopped.

This made a lot of sense to me, and it made York look pretty silly.

4) The Faculty governments are floundering.

I'm not the only one to have discovered that the college system was a big mistake. York President Harry Arthurs realized this a few years ago, after releasing endless study

continued on page 11