

INSIGHT

President Jean Ghomeshi: the year in retrospect

by Jeannine Amber

Last spring Jean Ghomeshi swept into the York Federation of Student (YFS) presidential office with an unprecedented number of votes, a mandate for change and a decisively political agenda.

For the first time in over a decade, York students had elected a president who was prepared to challenge a host of serious issues, including racism and sexism, topics which have been virtually ignored in the recent past by the YFS.

During Ghomeshi's term in office the YFS has introduced a policy of bilingualism, held a referendum to decide York's membership in the Ontario and Canadian Federation of Students, initiated the formation of the clubs coalition, granted funding for the Women's Centre, recognized the Lesbian and Gay Alliance as a student service, funded it accordingly, and took a position against proposed tuition hikes.

In order to finance many of the changes, this year's YFS has cut back many of last year's expenditures such as conferences and executive bonuses and eliminated last year's \$2,700 president's personal discretionary fund.

Ghomeshi has also taken an active stand on broader political issues, participating in an anti-Mulroney demonstration and acting as a vocal supporter of the anti-war movement.

Despite the fact that Ghomeshi came through on a significant number of his campaign promises, his period in office has not been a smooth one. Much of his political mandate has brought him under heavy fire from many students who have strongly differing ideas about the role of student government.

According to Ghomeshi, "it's only natural that when we have done things not done before by a student



government, there will be a reaction to it. It really boils down to a question of whether or not student government should be political."

However, much of the criticism levelled at Ghomeshi has eclipsed the political arena and reeks of personal attack. At various times during the school year, anonymous flyers have been distributed, some accusing Ghomeshi of the bizarre atrocity of supporting "tribalistic ideals" while others claim Ghomeshi wants nothing more than to "ignite a pile of [student] dollars and blow all kinds of smoke around thereby glorifying [himself]."

The campus press has been flooded with letters to the editor calling Ghomeshi everything from "a self centered brat" to a political opportunist.

According to Ghomeshi, "the criticism isn't necessarily confined to me, it's about a student government that addresses issues like barriers to university accessibility, whether they be the GST, tuition increases or discrimination — issues that take student government from a service-

oriented body to a political student body."

However, amid the malicious and often petty attacks on Ghomeshi, there have also been serious concerns expressed about the appropriateness of a student president taking an active political position.

As far as Osgoode's YFS representative Andrew Feldstein is concerned, the YFS president doesn't have the authority to speak out on certain political issues.

"For instance I don't think it's the place of the student government to pass a Troops out of the Gulf position," Feldstein said. "The university is so diverse, how can any one person speak to this issue?"

Feldstein believes student government should be concerned with accessibility insofar as asking the Canadian government for funds but should not "lobby for where the money should come from."

Marc Isaacs, vp (committees) for Founder college agrees that Ghomeshi is extending his reach beyond his elected responsibilities.

"I don't think Ghomeshi has the right to say York students are against war in the Gulf, for abortion, against tuition increases, and against the Mulroney administration without student consultation," Isaacs said.

According to Ghomeshi, "I never said that I represented all York students when I said those things, but when I was elected, I made it very clear what my political beliefs were."

Isaacs said "although Ghomeshi may subscribe to a particular set of beliefs he doesn't have the right to ascribe those politics to the entire student body. His first and foremost concern should be what is best for students."

Ghomeshi contends that "there are obvious discrepancies as to what York issues are. The issue I have spent the most time on this year is the tuition issue. I'd like someone to tell me that that is not a York issue."

Despite vocal opposition to many of Ghomeshi's actions, the president has been supported, especially from groups that in the past had difficulty gaining recognition from student government.

Dan Mahoney, a third-year arts student and member of the Lesbian and Gay Alliance strongly supports this year's YFS.

"They have done a hell of a lot more than last year's government who operated under the guise of being neutral," Mahoney said. "This year's student government addressed issues as opposed to fence sitting."

Cher McNulty from the Women's Centre collective said that the funding and recognition the centre received this year has been "extremely important."

Gillian Browne, a fourth-year history major feels the YFS has made significant gains in increasing awareness.

"I have noticed a definite improvement in the direction the student government is taking," Browne said. "I've noticed a growth in awareness about issues like racism and homophobia, and I think this is imperative in a university as diverse as York."

Nikki Gershman, third-year individualized studies student agrees. "The issues that were raised this year were extremely valuable and it's refreshing to see the students motivated to action regardless of their political views."

One of the chief complaints of many Ghomeshi opponents is that

although he was voted in with a majority, it only consisted of a small percentage of the total student body.

Michael Atlas, a second-year political science student said that "not enough people voted for them [the YFS executive] to be speaking on behalf of the student body; not even ten percent voted."

Ghomeshi conceded this point, but argued that "the reality of the situation is that we can't render the student union ineffective because less than 20,000 people voted. That would be highly unproductive."

Ghomeshi was elected with 1051 votes, more than twice the number of ever received by a single winning candidate.

In support, McNulty pointed out that "just because a small percentage of the student body voted it should not be held over the head of the student government."

"If they ran on a mandate to be political then they should be political," McNulty said.

The one thing that both opponents and supporters of Ghomeshi seem to agree on is that Ghomeshi has managed to increase political awareness at York.

Isaacs said that although he was disappointed with much of Ghomeshi's behavior, he commends him "because York has traditionally been an apathetic school, but under his administration people are getting involved and active."

YFS Equality Commissioner Elissa Horcroft said that "the mere fact people are talking about the YFS in the halls means we have politicized the students."

Whether this year's YFS has served the student body well depends entirely on each student's political position and their concept of what student government should do. If they believe that a move toward progressive change and increased awareness is a good thing, then the 1990-91 year has been a definite success.

At the conclusion of his interview with *Excalibur* Ghomeshi pulled out a recent edition of the *Toronto Star*.

In it, columnist Michele Landsburg had written, "the outcry against political correctness should be seen for what it is: the expression of a backlash, itself political, against all progressive causes. And when the status quo lashes back, we who are committed to social change know we're getting somewhere."

"That," Ghomeshi said, "is what it's all about."

Cyrano by F.W. Cameron



**TOWARDS A JUST
MIDDLE
EAST
PEACE**

The Jewish community at York welcomes the ceasefire in the Gulf, and fervently hopes that new realities will now serve as a basis for the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Unfortunately, there are serious issues blocking the path to peace:

- 1) How can the present ceasefire be valued when Iraq still maintains most of its missiles and missile launchers as well as its stockpile of biological and chemical weapons?
- 2) A basis for a **stable, permanent** ceasefire must include:
 - (a) the supervised disposal of Iraqi missiles and missile launchers
 - (b) the supervised disposal of Iraqi chemical and biological weapons
 - (c) the dismantling of Iraqi means of producing such weapons of mass destruction
 - (d) Iraqi declaration of peaceful intentions towards all states in the Mideast, including Israel.
- 3) How can Israel negotiate with a PLO when:
 - (a) the PLO leadership under Yassir Arafat has consistently supported Iraq's rape of Kuwait and missile attacks upon Israeli civilians?
 - (b) the PLO has launched rocket attacks from Lebanon on Israeli civilians during the recent war?
 - (c) Palestinians in Jordan and Israel have been joyously celebrating the Scud missile attacks on Israeli civilians and have been calling for Israel's destruction?

The events of the Gulf war has demonstrated that, after 43 years, many Palestinians and Arab governments still yearn for the destruction of Israel and the annihilation of her Jewish inhabitants. Until such time as the PLO leadership and regional Arab governments demonstrate their desire for peaceful co-existence with the Jewish state, with actions as well as words, the governments of Israel should not be expected to compromise the safety of her inhabitants.