

# EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

With Murray Miskin, chairperson of OFS

Murray Miskin is both the chairperson of the Ontario Federation of Students (OFS) executive and the chairperson of the editorial board of the *Ontario Student*. Past president of its student union and graduate of Trent University, Murray is now a first year student at Osgoode.

By SUSAN GRANT  
and JAMES BRENNAN

**EXCALIBUR: Exactly what is the OFS?**

**MISKIN:** The Ontario Federation of Students (or the Federation d'Etudiants d'Ontario since the organization represents Francophone students in Ontario as well), is a federation of post secondary students. There are 140,000 members who are represented through their various student councils. The student councils get together to formulate policies for the Federation which has an annual budget of about \$200,000. This is mostly used for keeping its large staff going.

Primarily the OFS is a lobbying group that represents the students to the Ontario government. It also works with individual student councils when they need help and also puts out a newspaper to keep students aware of the issues concerning them. At present we are working on the idea of a province-wide health care plan for students that would cover things like prescriptions.

People think of us as primarily a political organization and while it is true that much of our work is of a political nature, we also provide other services to the students of Ontario.

**EXCALIBUR — What do you see as the future of the OFS?**

**MISKIN —** In the past the OFS has represented most of the university students in Ontario. I think that now, since community colleges are starting to join us, that it is really becoming a post-secondary federation.

**EXCALIBUR — What about Western?**

**MISKIN —** The main problem with Western has been that for the past couple of years the student council has not been active in making the students aware of issues affecting students across the province, dealing almost entirely with local matters so that the students haven't seen what OFS have been doing. OFS hasn't had the exposure that it's had on other campuses. Since the referendum at Western (on OFS), there seems to have been a change. The editor of the *Western Gazette* told me that since the referendum, students have begun to realize the importance of OFS and have taken an interest in it. I expect that Western will be back in the OFS by the middle of next year.

**EXCALIBUR — How does the OFS stand on the issue of the tuition fee increase?**

**MISKIN —** We believe that tuition fees are the most visible and important psychological barrier against students from lower and middle class families from coming to university. This increase will discourage many students from continuing on to the university level and force students already enrolled to earn more money during the summer. With unemployment and inflation, and low wages for students, this is very unfair to students.

The government justifies raising tuition because everything else has gone up in price. What we are saying is that tuition fees should not go up because this very rise in the cost of living makes the student less able than ever to afford it. Another thing that is happening is that classes are becoming larger while the number of professors is being cut.

Combine with this the fact that a university degree is less likely to get you a job and one finds that the quality and value of a university education has gone down. Why should we pay more?

**EXCALIBUR — How is the OFS going about fighting the tuition fee increase?**

**MISKIN —** Our primary goal right now is

to stop the increase from happening. I think we stand a chance at this. We've already had two emergency meetings of student presidents and they are totally united behind us. We've also given the minister, Dr. Parrot, over 30,000 signatures on petitions and we have more coming. So we have a pretty broad basis of support among students. We're presently approaching boards of education, parents, residence associations and trade unions to inform them of the issues, and persuade them to join us in opposition to the fee increases. With such a broad basis of support, the government would realize that it is making a mistake and that it would be politically foolish to do anything but roll back the fee increase.

The executive of the OFS will be recommending to the emergency plenary of the OFS to be held this Saturday that mass meetings be held on each campus so that students can consider ways in which to fight the fee increase. Among other things that we will want to consider is a half-day moratorium on classes. After individual schools have decided what they are going to do to fight it, the OFS will co-ordinate an action, or a number of actions across the province. There might be another march to Queen's Park as there was last year.

**EXCALIBUR — What is the OFS position on the extra fee increases for foreign students?**

**MISKIN —** Beginning this January, foreign students starting university will have their fees tripled. In community colleges, this has already happened. The OFS is strongly opposed to this opportunistic move by the government. The government claims to be saving a lot of money which is in fact untrue. In 1980, when the maximum savings will occur, it will be worth less than one per cent of the budget. The government is quite proud of it, believing they can get some political mileage from it. They believe that there is a wide base of public support for these measures, given the current trend of feeling about immigration. Though the government's policy is not openly motivated by racism, it is primarily appealing to the apparently growing number of racists in Ontario, particularly Toronto. Meanwhile, in academic circles, the Boards of Governors across the province have stated their opposition to this increase and are fighting the government about it.

It is the developing countries, those who really need the assistance, who will be affected the most. US students won't stop coming here because of the increase. OFS feels that Ontario has an obligation to the developing nations and that its international position has been hurt by this measure. I don't see how the government can avoid recalling this increase later as it will hurt Ontario and the rest of Canada. Many of the foreign students will react by moving to universities in other provinces, so that Ontario will have merely shifted the cost burden onto other provinces.

**EXCALIBUR — What relation does OFS have to the National Union of Students?**

**MISKIN —** The National Union of Students is much like the OFS except on a national basis. It deals with the federal government on such important issues as employment, student aid and funding. Fifty per cent of student funding comes from the federal government so consequently this is very important. While there is presently no direct link between OFS and NUS, there may be one in the future since we have worked together in the past.

**EXCALIBUR — What are the salaries like in OFS and who gets them?**

**MISKIN —** Most people involved in OFS are volunteers. Members of the executive and those who work with student councils get paid an honorarium of \$50 a month. This is to compensate for the inability to take part-time jobs that many students need, rather than pay for the people's labour. There are eight staff members who belong to CUPE local 1281, who have a two year contract and



Dave Fuller photo

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are paid \$215 a week. This may sound like a lot but the staff are highly trained professionals who would probably be getting more in other jobs. These people are field workers, researchers, and information officers. One person also works on our newspaper, the *Ontario Student*, which comes out once a month and is distributed free on all OFS campuses.

**EXCALIBUR — How much does it cost each student to be a member of the OFS?**

**MISKIN —** It costs \$1.50 per student and this covers everything. However, a council sending a representative to an OFS conference has to pay for his or her traveling and living expenses.

**EXCALIBUR — What do you think of the York Student Council's proposed referendum which could result in York withdrawing from OFS and NUS?**

**MISKIN —** The wording of the coming referendum is quite sneaky. It asks: "Do you want an FM radio station? If so, do you want the money to come from a) the funds for OFS and NUS, or b) an increase in fees of \$2.50 a person."

The OFS considers this question a confusing way to tie together such diverse elements as a radio station, NUS and OFS. The wording does not allow those who vote

against the radio station to vote on whether or not to stay in OFS or NUS. I have worked out a rewording of the referendum that would deal fairly and directly with all of the issues, giving the students a choice in the matter.

**EXCALIBUR — With regard to opposing tuition fee hikes and cutbacks in education generally, do you think that student apathy is an issue?**

**MISKIN —** Student apathy is often raised by pessimistic student leaders as an argument for not bothering to do anything. I've always argued against this although I admit there is a problem. Most students are just too busy with their physical survival to concern themselves actively in the kinds of issues that we are working on. I'm fairly confident that students support the work that we're doing and that they like to have a group representing them to government, putting forward student views, opposed to student fee increases, for student jobs and funds. How much they are willing to participate in in this is another matter. There is a great feeling of helplessness among students at present. They don't believe they can change the world. But we are making gains. It would be nice if we had more students reading the *Ontario Student* and contributing articles to it. It would be nice to have more active and politically aware students but these are difficult times.