

# EDITORIAL

## One student's opinion

by James Rowan

Once more unto the breach, dear friends. Last week the SU Council heard a motion to rescind their policy on political parties. The motion, though having the support of a majority of Council, did not obtain the 2/3 majority necessary for success. Guess what? The motion arising from the failure of the motion to revoke was therefore made this week (if I lost you there, don't worry—you're doing no worse than most of the Councillors). The resultant motion to amend the By-laws was made at this Wednesday's meeting, and was passed by a 2/3 majority, thus enshrining the policy of recognizing political parties in the By-Laws of the Union.

My reaction to this was one that I think a lot of people shared: absolute shock. I thought the motion would be a mere technicality, shot down by Previous Question just moments after its introduction. It passed. What now? Good question. The matter is by no means over, it has only become more complicated.

The basic question of whether or not the Student Union should be recognizing political groups is a very, very touchy subject at Council—as much for reasons of power politics and personal conflicts as for any deeply held principles. What began as a policy matter has become deeply personal—no one listening to the "debate" last week could deny that. I won't get into who is disagreeing with who, for I find their arguments to be much more interesting than their arguing.

The practical argument is that the Executive, who have to deal with the government and external bodies, are uncomfortable. They reason that lobbying the government reeks of hypocrisy when you recognize a student group whose express goal is to defend the same policies that you are attacking.

This is a valid point. However, there is a practical counter-point to consider. The Union is constantly running into the problem of student apathy. Now what they are in effect saying is that yes, it is good to be involved, but no, the Union does not want you to get involved in party politics. While I cannot question that it is wrong for the Union as a whole to become involved in partisan party politics, it should allow its members (all 6700+ of them) to do so. Strictly speaking, the Council's attempts to revoke recognition of the groups is not an attempt to drive them from campus; it is merely an attempt to distance the Union from their activities, and to avoid any conflicts or appearances of hypocrisy. Yet refusing to recognize political groups is sending a message, and it is contrary to the larger aims of the Union—one of which is to foster responsibility in the students of the Union. Here are students attempting to take responsibility for the entire democratic system. What more could one ask for?

But why recognize political groups? In concrete terms, what reason is there? This is what Allan asked me. It stopped me dead in my tracks. What

positive reason can be offered? Well, by way of response, why recognize anyone? Recognizing any group is, at its most basic, merely acknowledgement—acknowledgement that the student group in question is a part of the Union, the Union in the sense of all 7000 student members, regard-

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less of what a few Councillors may think. It is recognition that what they are doing has value; that they are doing something for students. Not to recognize a student group is to say that they are not set up in the best interests of the students. The services and advantages that recognized clubs get should be secondary. Revoking a group's recognition should be the last straw, for the most serious of offenses; it is also an insult. The PC Youth (my example only because they are the ones who immediately spring to mind, having been the first to get recognition) is very active on this campus. They are educating students—as much by what they aren't saying as by what they are, but at least they try. The Referendum campaign run by the Liberals and the PCs on campus was a demonstration of what some dedicated active students can do. Yes, they had a political agenda, but they put something out there, acted as a focus for involvement and activism in the student body and they served as a forum. The bottom line is that these groups get students involved—if they didn't, this entire debate becomes moot. On a campus as apathetic as this one, getting someone involved is the nicest thing that anyone can do for Council. The VP-External may be uncomfortable arguing a point with the government when a political party at home, recognized by the very Council that sent her, is criticizing her position. That is a problem, I agree. However, I would be no less uncomfortable arguing a point with the government knowing that no one that I represent seems to know or care what Government is doing. The key is to get students involved—the Council should not take it upon themselves to direct the activities of their members away from certain avenues of interest. If we attempt to marginalize student political activities, we marginalize all political activities. Government will become a little more separate from the people, until inevitably, it becomes something that other people do. Neither the Student Union nor our society can survive that.

I do not dispute that student political parties are biased in favor of the parties that they represent, but what the Council frequently forgets is that it is an extremely biased organization in its own right. The job of every councillor is to represent the people who elected him/her. Everything they do and/or say must be considered in

light of this. The squabbles between arts and engineering are just as bad as any debate that the PCs and Liberals might get into, and are more damaging to the good of the Union. No one is suggesting that we refuse to recognize the EUS and AUS because they might disagree.

The ironic thing is that a deal was worked out with the political groups last week whereby they would have access to all the services that recognized clubs have, without actually having recognition. They seemed happy with this, and were prepared to leave it at that. Then Council didn't revoke their recognition, and they actually kept their recognition. Now this is where things get truly ironic: the By-Law accepted by Council actually sets more limits on them by recognizing them than would have existed if they had had their recognition revoked, but continued to operate under the special agreement. Before the original Jan. 20th vote to revoke recognition, Councillor McConnaghy asked the question of how the SU was going to guarantee that this agreement would continue in the future. My question is how can anyone expect any guarantee from a deliberative body that has already reconsidered the same subject twice, and is now well into its third and fourth reconsideration?

The thought that the NDP and PC Youth will magically disappear by revoking their recognition is naive; I don't honestly believe that anyone wants or expects this to happen. What those opposing recognition want is for them to continue their activities, but to not be associated with the Union in any way. Basically, they want plausible deniability if something goes wrong—but expediency and convenience should never be privileged over basic principles of democracy. It is high time that this debate is put aside so that both the student groups and the Council can move on to other things. The energy that is being wasted every week on this subject would be sufficient to accomplish a great many things. I would suggest that a referendum be held on this matter: since Council has

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proven that it is both deeply divided and unable to make up its mind, it might be best if the students themselves settled the matter. This way no friendships are ended, no bad blood is generated and the thing is settled. If this continues, the only winners will be the student press—this stuff makes great copy.

Immediately before the "last word" on the subject of political parties was spoken, the UNB Student Union gave notice of an upcoming motion that would ban the recognition of groups that would discriminate or restrict membership based on "gender, race, religion, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, age, family status,

mental or physical disability or political belief". These are certainly laudable aims, but I must question the goal and the method. This current situation has arisen out of a letter from the Student Union's lawyer, in response to a question from the Constitution Committee of the Union. In his response to the question of the propriety of refusing funding or recognition to political groups or those based on sexual orientation, he determined that it was not only proper, but perhaps is required to not recognize or fund them. Due to their very nature, they will make some students uncomfortable, and thus discriminate against those of other political views or sexual orientations, and are thus in contravention of existing By-laws. Paradoxically, he then went on to assert that the Carribean Circle is not contravening the By-law, because they could easily accept members of other nationalities, but a Liberal at a PC Youth meeting would be about as out of place as Andrew Dice Clay at a GALA meeting.

Yes, they would be out of place. However, is that any reason to revoke the constitutions of these clubs? As an Arts student, I can't see the EUS welcoming me with open arms and electing me as their president. Nor can I see how I would fit into the African Student's Union being neither African nor a student of African culture, politics or history. Is the fact that I won't fit in reason to bar me from the club? More importantly, is it reason to revoke the recognition of the EUS or the African Students Union? The rationale that the Student Union appears to be operating under in their notice of motion is that yes, all these clubs should be shut down.

Tellingly, instead of introducing motions 6.2 through 6.6 on the original hand out to Councillors, which would revoke recognition of GALA, the PC Youth, the Muslim Student's Association, the NDP Youth and the UNB Navigators, two new motions were introduced instead. Unlike what was said in Council and outside to some of the groups concerned, I am not convinced that the new motions aren't designed to serve the same purpose as the motions to revoke that weren't made. Based on the opinion of their lawyer, the Student Union is preparing to vote on a motion that would eliminate some unique groups that serve members of the university community, who are unlikely to easily find a place in other groups. Council's actions are confusing at best; adopting the new By-laws would only serve to muddy the waters further and to make the By-Laws self-contradictory.

All that the Student Union was acting upon in making notice of their motion Wednesday was one lawyer's opinion. All I present here is one student's opinion. If you are going to base your policy on an opinion, please consider mine. Perhaps I haven't the legal background of your lawyer, but to me the amendments proposed to the By-Laws are wrong and should not be passed. Do the right thing Councillors—vote no.



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The Brunswickan  
Student Union Building  
University of New Brunswick  
P.O. Box 4400  
E3B 5A3  
Phone: (506) 453-4983  
Fax: (506) 453-4958