

Council or Parliament?

Lately I've found myself in the uncomfortable position of defending institutions not for what they are now, but for what they could become.

That's my difficulty, for example, in supporting the university in a society which seems increasingly hostile to universities and their financial support. It's certainly not the arrogance of this institution, nor its pretensions to educating its inmates which I can defend. It's just that I fear that society will stop trying to foster institutions where real education could take place if the one concession to that revolutionary activity, independent thought, were turned into a high school. And so I keep working for the university as it could be.

A similar problem, and one that faces us all as members of the students' union in the coming council elections, is how one can continue to support the existence of a students' union at all. Its history of the past several years has been singularly grim: ego-tripping executives, pseudo-political infighting, councils led by their noses into all sorts of time- and money-wasting schemes. Its sordid history hardly needs repeating, and its triviality is rivalled only by the high school equivalent.

The anger which is often expressed when students call for a voluntary union is not hard to understand. And again, I find myself in the

position of having to defend an institution not on the basis of what it is, but on the basis of what it could be.

The hundreds of problems I see in the students' union can be distilled, I think, into three really serious deficiencies: lack of programme, lack of continuity, and lack of responsiveness to student needs. Before leaping into the Utopian future of what the union could become, perhaps we must look at where it has failed.

For all of the hesitations I have about the Young Socialists and the priorities they set, their entrance into SU politics is healthy. For the first time, candidates have put before us a programme, a set of actions they would take, a clear statement of what they believe.

No ultra-brite smiles, no mindless kicklines, no cynical "promise them anything, just so you get elected," and no "I'm Joe Goodguy and I want to serve students to the best of my ability . . . (which, as is evident even as he talks, is limited). They fought on issues, they took stands, and we knew what those stands were.

Without programmes, SU elections have come to resemble the graduation ceremony of a Dale Carnegie course—with a bit of beauty contest thrown in. Leaders are elected on how glibly they can mealy-mouth the three most popular lines, or worse, given our apathy toward campus politics, on the basis of what they look like and what kind of poster they chose.

And we pay for what we get: prima donas who become so carried away with their own importance and the goodies of office (the chance to be on TV to say what the good little students at the university think—wow—the chance to sit on the Board of Governors with the big boys), that our interests are ignored, or more probably, co-opted.

Necessary as programmes are, they aren't sufficient. Even the YS might be tempted to ignore their reactionary constituents once elected. The second problem to be solved is the lack of continuity in student government.

Once elected, the executive, like a drone bee, has achieved its one goal in life (translate the parallel between voters, candidates and the sexual habits of bees as you will; my version is that voters get screwed). Having met their constituency once, they need never face it again; they have no further responsibility towards it (unless, of course, they naively plan to dissociate themselves from their colleagues in the hope of running the following year). Some executive members might well be conscientious and actually do something for students while in office, but the system is just not set up to reward that kind of behaviour and recent history proves it rare.

The worst you can suffer as an idle or incompetent president or v-p is a bad press. Even if the rest of your executive demands that you resign, you're snug in your plushy office unless 51% of the students on campus sign a petition to evict you, and if you're stupid enough to get that many people mad at you, the fall on your head from your second floor office window probably won't hurt anything anyway.

This security of office and commitment to no one's future but her own, is closely linked to the third problem: student councillors' lack of responsiveness to student concerns.

It's amazing (amusing, too, if it weren't so hypocritical), to see the recent blossoming of interest in "student services" as election time approaches. One gains perspective by remembering that the budgetary homicide committed last year—after the election, of course—was the work of an executive which had campaigned not on political grounds, but almost to the man and woman on promises of serving the student. The comparison with Nixon's commitment to peace which "coincidentally" blossoms every fourth year, is unavoidable.

Given the constitutional framework within which she must work, and given the motivations of her fellow councillors, even the me most well-intentioned SU officer can do little.

So what do we do? Scrap the union (the euphemism is "make it voluntary"), retreat, become the bobby-sox cheerleaders for the good old U and all its glories like the student-robots of the '50's?

No. We can't. We shouldn't. Sad as it seems now, the SU is our only collective voice as students in an institution which when threatened, sacrifices our interests first; and the university is threatened. The real battle for recognition of our right to have some say in what we get for the \$500 we pay each year for the privilege of coming here is still to be fought.

As an example, I was appalled in Monday's GFC meeting to learn that profs consider that the

matter of quality of teaching as it relates to salary and promotion decisions is not an academic matter for discussion among staff and students, but a "condition of employment" which they will discuss only with the Board of Governors.

I don't foresee, nor do I hope for a confrontation between students and academic staff here; too often our goals of smaller classes, better library service, less bureaucracy, are very close. But I think those who advocate destroying the students' union had better take a closer look at the power the Academic Staff Association is acquiring, and which the administration has had for too long, and ponder the consequences of an even weaker student voice.

To make it an effective vehicle for making our concerns heard, but more importantly, to insure that it reflects those concerns rather than the vanity of our "leaders", we must deal with the internal problems which have made the students' union the silly trivial organization it is.

The solution is simple, if revolutionary. The students' union must be governed under a parliamentary rather than a presidential system. Only a parliamentary system will guarantee the formation of parties, which in turn will necessitate collective stands on issues (programmes), a sense of continuing responsibility to the students (if you screw-up this year, all those underclassmen who worked for you won't have a prayer getting elected under the party banner next year), and responsiveness (if you lose the confidence of your "cabinet" or of your party members on council, you take your place on the back benches; if your party loses the confidence of enough councillors, the opposition forms the government.)

As a not-quite-Canadian I blush to remind those of you lucky enough to have been born here of the virtues of your system.

No one would deny that this system will have its problems. Until a stability of parties develops, the political infighting will be much worse than any we have seen. But politics are like that: difficult. Surely those who argue for a voluntary students' union don't do so because the present system functions without problems, and anarchy should be our last choice.

Terri Jackson

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Just so that we're all privy to the election rumours floating around, the following campus luminaries are reportedly running for the presidency of the Students' Union: (alphabetically)

Patrick Delaney (present v-p academic)

Beth Kuhnke (present v-p services)

George Mantor (new council arts rep)

Glen Pylpa (sometimes independent candidate in federal elections, on a semi-slate with Wayne Madden as v-p academic)

Saffron Shandro (council commerce rep and perpetrator of Second Look)

Jim Tanner (sometimes candidate for almost everything, including provincial legislature, GFC and council)

Frans Slatter (v-p finance, 1971-72, student rep on Board of Governors)

The Young Socialists (with Mark Priegert, Chris Bearchell or Larry Panych for president on a full slate.)

I find no one on this list to whom I would be willing to entrust the task of reviving the SU as I have proposed here (though we may all have to make do.)

So, where ever you are out there—you who like me for the past three years, have sat in a library carrell and tried to ignore the silliness that went on in SUB—you who have more than political ambition and opportunism to offer—come out of your lab, come out of your carrell—run for SU posts and make it a union as it can and should be. tj