

Problems of collective choice

# Committee concept inadequate

by Mike Gardner

"He heapeth up riches and knoweth not shall gather them." — Psalm 39:6

Devout readers of the GAZETTE have probably realized that several appointments to various secretariats were made by Council last week. A careful perusal would have made it abundantly clear that a few problems arose. But problems are bound to arise when students having limited knowledge and experience are compelled to make a choice from an extensive list of applicants.

The point here is to explain briefly the basic inadequacies and problems of any process of collective choice, and show how the whole Applications Committee procedure is, by definition and design, fundamentally inadequate as it is presently conceived.

The costs of any collective decision in terms of time, efficiency, and objectivity will be a function of both the number of people who have to make the decision and the process by which the decision is made, i.e. the voting rule adopted.

Thus, while the numbers increase arithmetically and the voting rule approaches unanimity the costs in terms of time and efficiency would rise at a geometric rate. This is the whole rationale of an Applications Committee — a group small enough to arrive at a decision quickly, and yet large enough to be objective. Having one person make the decisions would mean possibly gains in time, but undoubtedly at the expense of objectivity. Having a group of twenty-five make the decision would on the other hand, mean a possible gain in objectivity but most certainly at the expense of efficiency. This is the basic trade-off, objectivity versus efficiency (in terms both of time and quality of choice).

The question is: what combination of number and voting rule is optimal to satisfy these criteria? Fortunately, this question has an objective answer in so far as the constitution dictates that the committees shall have three members. The voting rule is left up to them; simple majority or unanimity. "We took sweet counsel together" — Psalm 55:14

The very term committee implies discussion, controversy, resolution and decision (hopefully). In this particular case one individual had to be selected for each available position. In classic game theory parlance we have a three person, constant game (the thing which is to be decided is objectively defined as a unit, and will not be function of more or less strenuous bargaining on the part of any member of the committee.)

The decision of whether unanimity or simple majority would be required for selection is important. If a number of separate decisions have to be made (as was the case here) the possibility of bargaining is obvious. One member may feel strongly about one particular person for one position and

indifferent in all other cases. For such a person the unanimity rule would be most advantageous, since any decision would require his or her consent.

One could always hold out the threat of a veto on any one decision in exchange for compliance on a future decision (this procedure is technically known as logrolling).

formed during the first Council meeting.

By way of hard work, long hours, heated debate, and of course a statutory deadline, the requisite decisions were made, subject to the ratification of Council. Council met, as the GAZETTE pointedly pointed out, on March 12 to discuss these appointments.

Although on the one hand the

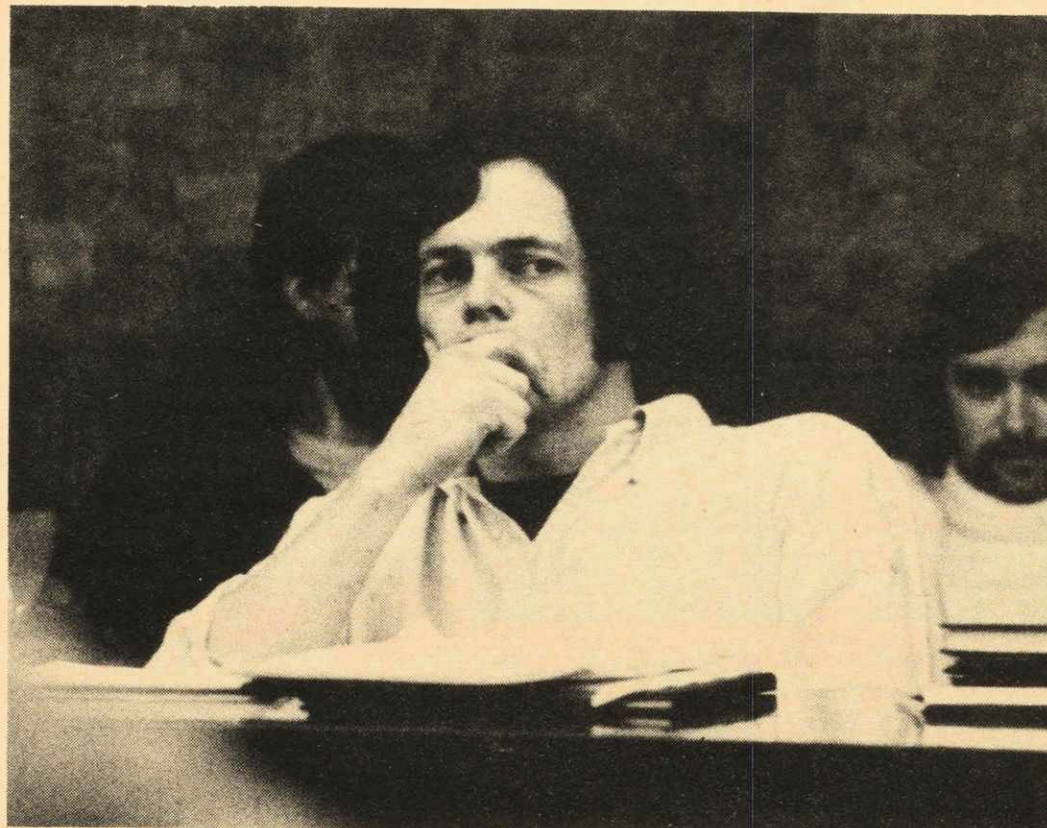
decisions would more profitably take place before the very individuals whose immediate futures were "at stake." But so as not to give any advantage to those applicants present (at the expense of those absent) and in order to expedite a reasonably rapid execution of the proceedings, we thought it best to limit the right of discussion to Council members, with the

would effectively prevent a reopening of applications.

In retrospect, it is quite clear that something went wrong. Some of those not chosen were quite understandably put out (figuratively) and felt compelled to restate their respective cases. It seems quite clear that we made a procedural mistake at the meeting, and do apologize to those concerned. The situation will be rectified.

If it is possible to speak in terms of fault, where does the fault lie? Basically, if choice must be democratic, some form of collective decision must be made. Having Council as a whole screen and interview all applicants would be ideal, perhaps, but for the reasons outlined above, it is essentially unworkable, if for no other reason than time constraints. Having the President make the decision would be efficient, but objectivity might be found wanting. A small representative committee is optimal, it seems. But this committee must have some procedural guidelines. At present such guidelines, if they exist at all, are of absolutely no use, much to the dissatisfaction of all, including the committee itself. Such procedural and substantive guidelines will be forthcoming in the near future.

The present committee is not omniscient. Personally, I think no defence is needed, nor offered, for some allegations which have been raised concerning their performance. As with the rest of us, experience only is sometimes deficient.



Mike Gardner, President of Dalhousie Student Union

(peter clarke/dal photo)

If, however, a simple majority only is necessary, the intensity of preference for any one individual by a member does not play as big a role since one person can always be overruled. So where the possibilities of bargaining exist (as they do in any collective decision), the majority rule is quite advantageous and increasingly so as numbers increase.

"Behold how good and sweet it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." — Psalm 133:1

How did the new Council approach the situation? Procedurally the choice as to precise method of selection is precluded to some extent by the Constitution. Section 4(3) reads: "Within 10 days of taking office the president shall nominate for each position (i.e. SUB Affairs Secretary and Communications Secretary, as well as Entertainment Secretary, pending constitutional amendment.) A member of the Student Union (a nominee) may be a member of Council". Nominations to these positions require the examination and ratification of council.

In terms of speed and efficiency the unilateral, dictatorial approach is much the simplest way of dealing with nominations of any kind. But eschewing any possible inference of moral turpitude, nepotism or patronage, and bowing to the dictates of objectivity, honesty and fair play, I thought it wiser to defer the business of appointments to the Applications Committee directly. This Committee was

GAZETTE reporter should be congratulated for his staying power — the deliberations lasted four and a half hours — the other hand should have its knuckles rapped. I take exception to his headline (The GAZETTE's), "Controversy mars Council meeting". Controversy may mar a garden party (or even a newspaper), but certainly not a body whose "raison d'être" is predicated upon its very existence. The choice of words and implication demonstrates a limited appreciation of the English language, as well as a basic misconception of the nature and function of a Council.

Semantics (and sophistry) aside, I feel that a Council meeting should not be considered as a unity itself; the unity lies rather in the context of the whole series of meetings over a year, each inextricably bound to the last and next both in content and direction.

So, controversy could not mar a meeting, since the meeting is not over until the controversy is resolved. Controversy is healthy; it at least implies participation and an active exchange of ideas. Would the GAZETTE condemn this? I think not.

At any rate, judging from the tone and content of the paper's editorial, the headline might better have read "Contumely mars Council meeting."

"He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." Eccles. 1:18

The actual Council meeting was not held "in camera". We felt that any questioning of Applications Committee

provision that others present would speak only when questioned directly by a Council member. This, it was hoped,

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"It is not that the ministry has been tried and found wanting, rather it has been found hard and not tried."

In a world where men love themselves, the idea of loving others seems to be hard for some to understand.

In a world preoccupied with getting, the idea of giving may be hard to understand.

In a world preoccupied with comfort, the idea of 'doing without' may be hard to understand.

In a world preoccupied with saving itself, the idea of Someone who has saved the world, may be hard to understand.

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