

The life and times of a student movement

by Mark Roppel

When U of A students go to the polls on Friday for the CFS referendum it will not be the first time they have voted on membership in a national student organization. In fact, there have been four referenda at this university - all of them failed. But the involvement of the U of A with student organizations is far more complex than this implies.

The history of the national students' movement in Canada goes all the way back to 1926 when the National Federation of Canadian University Students (NFCUS) was formed.

NFCUS was services oriented. It organized national debating tours, a scholarship program and provided discounts on athletic equipment.

As time passed the organization became more and more political. In 1937 a campaign for student financial assistance was launched, but the depression and then WW II hindered such activities. Cold war paranoia nearly destroyed the organization in the early 1950's.

But by the late 1950's the organization was gathering momentum and membership. At one point, the Federation actually represented 80 per cent of post-secondary students.

In 1963 NFCUS changed its name to the Canadian Union of Students (CUS).

In 1964 the much lobbied for Canada Student Loans Program was implemented although the program was not all students had hoped it would be. It wasn't even at all what the Diefenbaker government had promised.

By this time, cracks were beginning to appear in the structure of CUS. In 1964 the Quebec Union of Students (UGEQ) voted to separate from CUS and form an independent provincial organization.

CUS was becoming more activist with issues such as the Vietnam War creating divisions among students.

By 1966 a number of provincial affiliates of CUS began to emerge and the services side was having great success chartering discount flight through its travel agency. However, this was a last gasp.

In 1968 the University of Alberta, claiming CUS had become too radical and was not concerning itself with issues of direct interest to students, held a referendum and withdrew from CUS. A number of universities followed, culminating in the withdrawal of the University of Toronto in October of 1969. CUS then voted to dissolve itself.

However, the travel services which CUS offered did not disappear.

In Ontario, the University of Toronto, Ryerson, the University of Western Ontario, and Carleton formed the Association of Ontario Student Councils. To handle the services in Western Canada, the University of Alberta and the University of British Columbia, and the University of Saskatchewan established Western Student Services.

In 1972 WSS collapsed with debts of \$40,000. ASOC expanded, and was nation wide - including Quebec - by 1978. ASOC opened a Canadian University Travel Services (CUTS) office at the U of A on February 5, 1979.

On the political front, after the collapse of CUS in 1969 there was no effective student lobby organization until 1972 when the Ontario government's plans for full-cost tuition and all-loan student aid system prompted the formation of the Ontario Federation of Students.

In May of 1972 representatives from 26 students' unions met to approve the founding of a new national students' organization. In October of that year, 51 students' unions met at the founding conference of the National Union of Students (NUS).

The founding conference was not exactly a success. Atlantic and Quebec delegates walked out when their proposals for the structure of NUS were turned down. Nevertheless a Central Committee was established. This committee spent its time soliciting members and trying to survive on a budget funded primarily by donations.

The first annual general meeting of NUS was held in May 1973 in Halifax. Twenty-four founding members, including some Atlantic Universities, which had walked out in October, were present. There were no representatives from Quebec.

A membership fee of thirty cents was approved, and the organization began operation with a budget of \$35,000 and a staff of two.

By 1979 the organization had expanded to include eight staff, 37 members, was publishing a booklet called the Student Advocate, and had a budget of \$170,000. Fees had been increased to \$1.00.

But 1979 was not a good year for NUS. Referenda defeats at the University of Manitoba, the University of Victoria, and the U of A suggested that changes were necessary.

Steps had already been taken to join the political NUS with the services oriented ASOC. The two organizations had held a joint annual meeting in 1978. The affiliation was formalized in 1981 when the two organizations were merged at the founding conference of the Canadian Federation of Students

(CFS). NUS was to be the political wing and ASOC became CFS services.

It was hoped that the merger of ASOC and NUS and some restructuring would create a more effective lobby group.

Provincial representation became more important; the discrepancies which existed from province to province in NUS were eliminated. Most provinces have a provincial organization associated with CFS. Two notable exceptions are Quebec - which apparently want nothing to do with a national organization - and Alberta. The Federation of Alberta Students was to become CFS Alberta but these plans were shelved when FAS collapsed after the withdrawal of the University of Calgary.

The University of Alberta has never been a member of NUS although three referenda were held on this campus; in 1973, 1975, and 1979. The first two referenda were notable mostly for apathy. In 1973 only four per cent of students bothered to vote. The 1979 referendum was much more interesting. SU President Cheryl Hume on the "yes" side and VP External Steven Kushner on the "no" side insulted each other and heatedly debated whether NUS advocacy of full employment would undermine the capitalist system. When the air had cleared, a rather decisive 66.5 per cent of the 25 per cent of students who voted were opposed to joining NUS.

Although the U of A was not a member of NUS it was a member of ASOC and had been since 1979 when the travel office was established in SUB. This put the University in a rather peculiar spot with regards to CFS: we were members of CFS Services without being members of CFS.

At any rate, the U of A sent delegates to the CFS founding conference - from October 14 to 19 1981.

Underfunding was the focus of this conference. Inflation was eating away at post-secondary funding and the then Justice Minister, Jean Chretien, was talking of 11 billion dollar cuts in education spending.

The conference adopted the motto "Access not Axe us". A National Students Lobby Day was organized for the last day of the conference, and representatives met with then Secretary of State Gerald Regan.

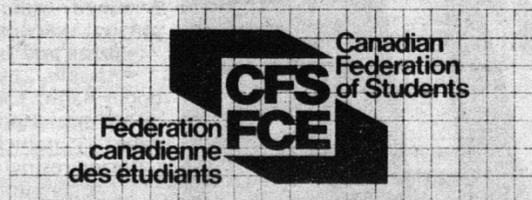
The U of A was now a prospective member of CFS, with the provision that a referendum for full membership be held within two years. This is the referendum that will be held Friday.

CFS immediately began lobbying the government for liberalization of the student loan system and more money for student work programs. CFS claims these efforts have been quite successful. The government increased spending on student job creation by 50 million dollars and the weekly amount that students are eligible for on their loans was almost doubled. Also, a CFS fee increase from \$1.00 to \$3.00 per student has given the federation a budget of approximately \$350,000 and allowed the organization to expand its activities.

However, CFS' two year history has been far from smooth. Brenda Cote, the first chair of the organization, finished her term so disillusioned she publicly admitted that she wished she had never taken the job. Clashes between the militant Cote and other members of the executive only served to highlight some of the divisions within CFS. Cote had been elected on an activist ticket after she led a dramatic one week occupation of the Universite de Moncton administration building to protest a massive tuition increase.

At the May 1983 general meeting in Saskatoon, delegates attempted to deal with regional splits, conflicts between the political and services wings, general disagreement over the federations' purpose and direction, and a \$47,000 deficit largely carried over from NUS. Moves were taken to merge the boards of the political and services branches and a plan for paying off the debt was formulated.

The future of CFS is still very uncertain and the referendum on Friday will be pivotal. CFS has won 21 of the 23 membership referenda it has ran but one of the losses was at the largest University in English Canada, the University of Toronto. Presently Carleton, with 12,000 students, is the largest member institution. If the U of A joins, CFS will be much more credible. The decision of U of A students will likely affect upcoming referenda at other universities, including the University of British Columbia, York University, and the University of Calgary.



The bare facts

Analysis by Jens Andersen

Scrutinizing the constitution of the Canadian Federation of Students, reveals an organization complicated enough to stagger a systems analyst. But let's try describing the barest basics.

CFS begins simply enough, at the bottom, with the student body of a post-secondary institution like ours. This body must first vote to join or not join CFS, as the U of A will do this Friday. Not joining would simplify matters, but let's assume for explanatory purposes that the institution joins up.

Now the student association (in our case the Students' Union) sends delegates to the annual general meeting, held every May. Along with delegates from other associations they elect a chairperson and treasurer apiece to the CFS Central Committee (the political wing) and CFS Services (the drudges who do things like running CUTS Travel Services and the Canadian Programming Services - a speaker service featuring Canuck talent like poet Earle Birney and cartoonist Terry Mosher).

But more positions than just chairperson and treasurer exist to flap the two wings. For the Service wing there are also up to nine provincial reps to round out their Board of Directors.

The political wing has nine provincial reps of its own, a women's commissioner elected by women's caucus (and ratified by the general meeting plenary), and international relations commissioner elected by the plenary, three miscellaneous members representing constituent groups (or if these groups fail to materialize, elected by the plenary), one non-voting Quebec observer, and, to confuse the issue, a representative from the services wing.

If all this seems confusing, don't feel too discouraged. Apparently CFS is somewhat confused too, because in its constitution it says the service rep is elected by the Services Board. However, in the flow chart supplied to the Gateway is says that the

Services rep is elected by the plenary.

At any rate, the plenary sets the policy and direction for CFS, then the Services Board and the Central Committee dutifully carry out their orders with the help of hired executive officers, researchers, fieldworkers, staffers and whatnot.

Direction is given in the form of standing resolutions (passed by a two thirds vote), and policy directives (passed by simple majority apparently, although the constitution does not say so explicitly).

And what sort of goals, you ask, is CFS pursuing? In the preamble to its constitution, CFS states that its ultimate goal is a "system of post-secondary education which is accessible to all, which is of high quality, and which is nationally planned (has anyone told CFS that this will probably require a constitutional amendment?); which recognizes the legitimacy of student representation, the validity of student rights, and whose role in society is clearly recognized and appreciated."

With the noted exception the above proposal is none too controversial. Even your average Advanced Education Minister would probably be inclined to agree with it, at least until the ideal was boiled down into specific proposals. Ditto for the other constitution calls for democracy, cooperation, a sharing of ideas and experiences, balanced growth and development of student organizations, legislative change, programs of action, frameworks, strategies, etc. etc.

The specific policies CFS has come up with promise to be more contentious however, and not all deal with education. Gateway has had difficulty in getting these policies, but CFS has promised to get them to us by Wednesday's edition.

Preliminary indications from the CFS files indicate interesting positions like requesting worldwide nuclear disarmament, and Canada's withdrawal from NATO....