

# What is a democratic Students' Union?

This paper is contributed in order to stimulate further discussion on the real meaning of a democratic, representative and politically responsible Student Union. The paper was prepared by a working group of the Student Christian Movement.

In order to facilitate further discussion on these themes, the S.C.M. will devote a Friday Noon Forum to the theme: "What is a democratic, responsible and representative Student Union?"

## INTRODUCTION

If one stops to consider the long-range direction of our Student Union, various questions must be asked. How can we develop more democratic structures that are the expression of the member of the Student Union? (i.e., can we develop structures which start at the grass roots level and are based on the direct participation of students). If we are to have a Student Union that truly represents students, how can we find better ways of allowing students to express their views? How can we develop a politically responsible Student Union which has a concept of how change occurs at a university and in the wider society? In addressing these rather fundamental questions, we must relate concepts of democracy, responsibility and representativeness to the form or structural expression of these concepts.

## A NEW WAY FORWARD

To develop a democracy in the Student Union where all students can meaningfully participate, requires a decentralization of the Student Union structure. The university structure itself, in terms of budget and organization, is presently based on a departmental (specialty) organization. To have effective ways of relating to this structure, we must organize departmental student associations for both undergraduates and graduates. In the recent crises of a number of departments, including Sociology and Political Science, students found it necessary to organize on a departmental basis for effective discussion and political action. This grass roots organizing can only be done by students who are directly involved, whether it be students in the Department of History or students in the Education Psychology Department. In the past while many departmental clubs have been organized, notably in the Sciences, these have only been social and educational "clubs" not student associations which tried to see the dialectical interaction between educational-curriculum concerns and meaningful political action. It is only by entering into the political action aspects of educational formulation that students can effectively improve the quality of education at this university. The

role of the Student Union in this question of direct democracy is to encourage and financially support this grass roots organizing.

It will be noted that the concept of an Arts Union is not required in this structure because the important decision making is at the departmental level. Nevertheless it may be necessary for the departmental student associations to come together on an ad hoc basis to work on specific issues that will involve the entire faculty. This form of departmental structure should prove to be the most relevant to students, as it is closest to their area of experience and allows them to participate directly (i.e., classroom discussions, voting, negotiations with faculty, etc.). These grass roots organizations must also be related to the Student Union—which itself must be democratized!!!

## A REPRESENTATIVE UNION

For the Student Union to truly represent the desires of students, power must be given back to the students and taken from the Student Council. A peculiarity of student elections is that student rarely can call their elected representatives into account because they seldom risk re-election. Thus to keep really abreast of which students really think on a variety of issues, it will be necessary to have regular "town hall" or mass

meetings of students to discuss important issues and give direction to the Student Union. Similarly, more referendums should be held. Students should be elected to positions on the Board of Governors and the GFC — not appointed by the Students' Council. It is only when students insist on a direct participation in matters of importance that affect them, that we can move towards a more democratic Student Union. To engage in important issues affecting the university, and therefore society (because this university is part of this society)—we must examine ways of bringing meaningful social change.

## AN "ACTION" UNION

If we are to move from a Student Union that engages primarily in social games to one which is concerned to relate education to politics, we can find some help in the experience of labor unions. Labor unions act on behalf of their members to bring better working conditions and financial considerations. Student Unions have many similar problems. Classroom conditions and costs of education are important aspects of our life.

An example of financial considerations for students in Edmonton is the high cost of housing, whether it be in residence, in apartments or in basement

suites. With housing in the city being in high demand, the prices are forced up because the supply of housing units is low. To change this situation we must push the City Council and other government bodies for more public housing. In pushing for more public housing we will be coming in conflict with other interest groups in society—notably the Chamber of Commerce and private apartment house owners, both groups being against public housing. It is important to recognize that these other interest groups are heavily influential in the political parties. Therefore we cannot expect the political parties to act as a clean representative of student in the political arena. Only students can represent themselves!!!

An individual student in the society has little power to change the situation. Therefore our Student Union to be "politically responsible" to our interests as students must become an "action" union, not only a union which does research into student housing. The issue of housing does illustrate how the Student Union can take up our interests and act upon them. For effective political action in the university and in the society, we will require alliances with our interest groups if we are to bring effective pressure to bear to change society.

## His campaign is sponsored by PHALLUS, INC.

### The point was that student government might be irrelevant

By RICH VIVONE

#### ITEM FOR A COLUMN

McGill University of Montreal is holding student government elections. Many candidates have the customary wildly impossible platforms. But Ted Spevak, science 2, has a new idea and he is serious.

In a newspaper advertisement, Spevak describes himself: "the candidate is a warm understanding person who has carved a niche for himself in many girls. He is an able politician, always in the middle, rapidly darting forward, then pulling back, finally setting the issue with a spurt of war understanding."

"The candidate and PHALLUS promise to penetrate all unexplored regions of McGill".

Spevak's platform promises efforts to merge residences, abolish the student newspaper, hire the Polish hockey team to help the university team, and create an autonomous state consisting of McGill and the Playboy Club.

#### ANOTHER ITEM FOR A COLUMN

Larry Burko is a student at the University of Waterloo. When a petition put the student government out of office, Burko was a candidate for president in the subsequent election. He ran on an apathy program.

His major promise ensured better and bigger campus dances. He also suggested the streamers used at the dances could be improved should the student government really get serious about their work.

Larry Burko is a personal

friend and, at the Canadian University Press conference in Toronto, we renewed acquaintances. He told me he was going to run for president again in the spring elections at Waterloo and would run on the same platform. He was optimistic because he had received more than six per cent of the student vote last time.

#### CONCLUSIONS FROM ITEMS FOR A COLUMN

The cases cited above are just two of many examples of students running on silly, irrelevant platforms. And it's happening all around the country—except Alberta of course where it takes an extra decade for popular ideas to receive some recognition.

What Spevak and Burko have to say is that student government to a vast majority of people on campuses is not something to be concerned about and if you know even the fundamentals of student government, you know they are too damn close to being absolutely correct.

One of the chief criticisms is that student government essentially has no power to do anything of concern to students.

If you don't believe it, ask the candidates for students' union president in the Feb. 21 general election. Don't listen to their

exaggerated, almost incredible platforms. Ask them point blank what they CAN do—what they have the power to do. Ask them if the student government has any power to get rid of compulsory courses such as physical education for all first year students—if of course the majority of students want this.

This, to my mind, is the critical question in the upcoming election—CAN THEY DO ANYTHING?—and it should be answered.

If the answer is negative then we should do away with all the hoopla and crap of election week and have a few interested students appointed to positions where they can deal with the administrative work involved in running a students' union.

If the reply is affirmative—and it really can't be until a few fundamental changes are made—then the council and the students' union must get down to serious business. The elected members will have to form a series of seminars

with students in order that the students can talk to these new rulers and tell them what they would like done.

Changes, especially wholesale radical changes, will come slowly and with much grievance and regret from those relinquishing the power. But the student government must be able to work in this situation—it can't be afraid to lose friends in the administration or make bad friends anywhere. The student government has to get off its dandy foamed chairs and work for the student.

This is the week to find out if students are voting for some-

thing worthwhile—or are just playing games that children play.

**Dr. P. J. Gaudet**  
**Dr. A. J. Bevan**  
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