

Student Activism in the '80's: an exercise for conservative thinkers?

Editor's Note:

In the last issue of the Gazette, we ran a feature on the occupation by 300 students of the Université de Moncton's administration building. This week, we feature an article by Brian Howlett on the evolution of student activism in this country since 1970. What inspired students at a small New Brunswick university to agitate against the administration was the cost of higher education: specifically, the exorbitant amounts demanded in tuition fees. These are pragmatic concerns, especially when they are compared to the rampant idealism of the '60's. But how removed is the Université de Moncton incident from the larger picture? Changing times create different problems: 15 years ago, Vietnam occupied the minds of socially conscious youths; today, the issues are wages, high prices, unemployment and the disintegration of our way of life. The nature of student activism in Canada has changed over the years - students who now make demands of the establishment, make them with their eyes trained on their own fortunes. They want, if not a place in the sun, a place to keep warm. The university protest in Moncton last March illustrated that circumstances have not eroded the depth of feeling evident on Canadian campuses over vital issues in our society.

by Brian Howlett
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Conservatism on campus. It has become a catch-all phrase for describing university life in the '80's. Many people compare the modern campus with its counterpart of the '60's, which has been labelled the decade of radicalism. But radicalism and conservatism are only buzzwords, and as such fall short of conveying an accurate understanding of students of both decades. It is impossible to evaluate an era that has just begun but perhaps some light may be shed on the attitudes and motivation of modern day students by understanding their earlier counterparts.

On April 3, 1970, 300 students gathered in the council chambers of McMaster University's Gilmour Hall to protest food conditions in on-campus cafeterias.

Led by a group called the McMaster Students Movement, the students proposed a set of demands designed to guarantee better food and working conditions.

These proposals met with an unfavourable response from the administration, and news reached the students that files had been moved from the administration offices to a locked room in the basement of Gilmour Hall in anticipation of a sit-in.

At 5 p.m. that afternoon, the administration's fears were realized when 50 students took over the president's office, beginning what is now referred to as the 'food strike'.

By Monday a steady stream of students, professors and workers visited the occupied office in an unprecedented show of support. That evening an agreement was reached between the university and the students.

On January 13, 1982, 200 students collected in the council chambers of Gilmour Hall to block the passage of proposed changes to the business program. In a rare display of unity, students argued they were not informed of the changes when they applied and registered at McMaster. They said the restructuring of the program should be postponed for a year so they could remain unaffected. However, the Senate overwhelmingly voted in favour of the proposal to despecialize the program.

Disappointed students filed out of the chambers and reorganized themselves to determine further action. After 28 days of lobbying senate members and circulating petitions, the students succeeded in overturning the decision.

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Both situations are examples of students attempting to assert their rights in the face of administration opposition. In the former, students took immediate action; in the latter they elected to follow more conventional channels. The two different courses of action reveal significant traits concerning the era each took place.

The familiar tactics of the '60's -- building take-overs, strikes and demonstrations -- have been replaced by litigation and tactics ranging from lobbying and grievance procedures to educating the public and fellow students.

These are activities more attuned to the current era, when students see less justification for violence, interruption of classes or even demonstrations on campus.

In the space of one decade, student attitudes have undergone drastic changes. In the '60's, campuses across the western world were labelled 'radical' by a frightened and confused establishment. This tended to exaggerate a new way of thinking. While many campuses, such as Ohio's Kent State, witnessed uprisings of more than 10,000 students, the radical element was still a vocal minority.

The McMaster Student Movement received little student support until the issue of cafeteria food arose in

1970. Until that incident student activism was the exception rather than the rule.

But history tells us that it is the actions of a few rather than the many that initiates change and influences thought. Such was the case in the '60's.

The success of the McMaster Student Movement signalled the impending realization that formal structures were no longer a viable force in the realm of student reform. Students saw they could do things their own way. Growing confidence in their own abilities coincided with growing mistrust of the establishment.

David Lawson, a member of the McMaster Counselling Centre, was an undergraduate studying sociology at McMaster in the late '60's.

"The food strike was a result of a specific issue, as was last year's actions over the business program changes," he said. "But the difference lies in that the food strike was also part of a broader range of issues. It was a rejection of the university, the United States and the Viet Nam war."

The Viet Nam crisis was one of the most important factors in the disillusionment of young people with society. As television pictures daily relayed graphic images of the atrocities being committed in a war that nobody understood, North American

students reacted.

Students in Canada, London, Rome, Paris and Tokyo joined U.S. students on October 15, 1969 in a moratorium on the war. Demonstrations, marches and sit-ins arrested normal campus activity as students desperately fought for an end to the conflict.

"Students in the '60's didn't like what they saw and wanted to change things," said Lawson. "They really believed they could change the world. They were naive and idealistic."

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"Today, students no longer want to change the world. They're more pragmatic and realistic. They want to be a part of society."

"In the '60's we thought there was something wrong with people going into engineering, law and business. These disciplines were viewed as being part of the capitalist society against which we were rebelling," said Lawson.

According to Alvin Lee, McMaster administration president, students today are more concerned with getting a job than changing society.

"Students have almost a professional attitude to their studies," he said. "There is a big swing to professional programs today, whereas in the '60's business was almost a dirty word to students."

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"In the '60's there was a global paroxysm of social movement and revolutionary expressionism," Lee said. "There was a great deal up for grabs. Now things are much quieter. Students desire to be not enemies of society, but active members."

Part of this desire to conform rather than confront stems from the realization that jobs are not as plenti-

ful as they once were. Students of the '60's didn't have to worry about getting a job upon graduation. Today, the restricted job market has produced a more competitive atmosphere on campus.

When undergraduates were asked by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1969 what they wanted to get out of their education, they ranked learning to get along with people first and formulating values and goals for their lives second.

By 1976 these aims had been replaced by getting a detailed grasp of a special field and obtaining training skills for an occupation. Top among the reasons new students give for attending university today is getting a better job.

Aren Geisterfer, a member of McMaster's Chaplain's Office, has counselled students since the mid-'60's at the University of British Columbia, Western Ontario, Waterloo and McMaster. He says students today are less certain of their future.

"Students are just as anti-establishment today as they were in the '60's," he said, "but now they need the government and big business. They are more cautious in expressing opposition because they realize these bad times are staying."

"Today there is constant change in all facets of life, including employ-

ment, nuclear warfare and culture," he said.

"The only certainty is uncertainty. Students ask themselves, 'Will I make it or not?'. The realities of life are such they have to be more conservative. They have to prepare for difficulties. There is nothing to fall back on so they have to be more careful."

Lawson referred to a theory that states a person's attitudes are formulated during adolescence. Students of the '60's grew up in a prosperous era when the economy was healthy and the government was honest. Their idealism is more understandable in this light.

On the other hand modern day students grew up in an era strained by Watergate and the Viet Nam war. The impact was profoundly negative. According to a U.S. magazine, *Change*, today's undergraduates are estranged from the political process and cynical about civic life as a result.

Between 1969 and 1979, the percentage of students who considered it essential to keep up with political affairs dropped from 51 per cent to 38 per cent.

There is no doubt that students have responded to the economic realities of the times. They are more sophisticated than their naive counterparts of the '60's who believed they could change the world.

Concern with Viet Nam, civil rights and campus rules for student conduct -- issues that dominated the '60's -- have passed. Current students list tuition fees, institutional facilities and staff firing and hiring as their prime concerns.

This growing self-concern manifests itself in all aspects of student life. A survey taken in 1981 shows students are twice as sexually active as students were in 1969.

There is no doubt that students have responded to the economic realities of the times. They are more sophisticated than their naive counterparts of the '60's who believed they could change the world. But this sophistication is a double-edged sword, for today's students are less aware of the past than a decade before.

In the early '60's, American groups such as Students for a Democratic Society incorporated Marxist ideologies into their own philosophies. They demonstrated an informed grasp of the different currents of

thought that had run through history. But today, such is not the case.

"Students today don't seem to have a sense of history," said Lawson. "The members of the McMaster Students Movement on the other hand were reasonably well-read. When they attacked capitalism it was from a knowledgeable Marxist perspective."

Those who have learned the lessons of the '60's look back on their involvement with wiser eyes. In a March 28 *Toronto Star* story, Leora Proctor Salter, an early '60's activist at the University of Toronto, said "We used to be grossly romantic. Now we have become serious instead of spouting rhetoric. We're more useful now and less quotable."

Tom Faulkner, a leader of the students' administrative council at the U of T during the '60's, said "When I think back on it now, it was always possible to get people out for a demonstration. The real problem was what to do for organization afterward. That's when you lost a lot of the excitement."

Bob Spencer, then president of the SAC and now 33 year-old chair of the Toronto Board of Education, added, "No individual can change things by himself. We accept that now as the rule, but ten years ago it was revolutionary. The group process is the basis of change, and the '60's were a test of fire for group action."

The swing from 'radicalism' to 'conservatism' is not altogether healthy, for it resembles more of a reaction to confusion and uncertainty than a coherent restatement of beliefs.

There has not been a sense of learning from the '60's or of maturation on the part of today's students. Rather, there has been reaction and a digging-in of the heels. The social impulse of the '60's has surrendered to an understandable concern with careers. Students have become more self-oriented than conservative.

But attitudes are hard to trap on paper. They are dynamic and can never be gauged with complete accuracy. Perhaps the attitude of today's student can best be expressed in the following fictional exchange between a modern student and an interviewer, taken from *Change* magazine:

Interviewer: Will Canada be a better or worse place to live in the next ten years?

Student: Canada will definitely be a worse place to live.

Interviewer: Then you must be pessimistic about the future?

Student: No, I'm optimistic.

Interviewer (with surprise): Why?

Student: Because I have a high grade point average and I'm going to get a good job, make a lot of money, and live in a nice house.