

EDITORIAL

Understanding the Motives - Student Elections -

by Kwame Dawes

In this week's edition of the Brunswickan, aspiring student politicians have been given the opportunity to explain why they want to be involved in student government. After we have managed to accept the fact that the selfish, but wholesome motive of beefing up a resume is one of the more common reasons for the ambition of these students, we must contend with the other reasons. These reasons should have everything to do with their perception of their abilities.

I have always had a hard time accepting the basic posture that politicians have to assume in order to win votes. Having been brought up in a tradition that held that leadership is not something to be gained through self-promotion; the very practice of campaigning for student office came as a disquieting reality to me during my undergraduate years. In the British styled high school that I attended, it was obnoxious, crude and simply uncouth to ask people to vote for you. You expressed a willingness to serve and you simply trusted your manifest integrity to do the work for you. If you lost a vote, you accepted the decision of the body politic with stoic good-naturedness, and congratulated the winner even if you thought he was a totally inadequate ignoramus.

There were certain advantages to this code of behaviour. Firstly, the bitterness and rancour that often arises when people get involved with open campaigns against each other were avoided entirely. Secondly, students were not forced to deal with the long list of promises that campaign-oriented politicians have come to be characterized by. The expectations of the leader were clear and the student selected was under scrutiny from the word "go". Thirdly, the vote of confidence that was implicit in this process of selection was tremendous. Without any overt attempts at convincing the "electorate" through speeches and canvassing, the student was being selected on the basis of sheer popularity and ability as demonstrated in their regular activities. At school, we took great pride in our leaders and a head-boy (it was an all-boys college) gained a position of prestige that would last his entire life.

The cry of the barbarous multitude and the tumult of the fickle masses at University were for me startling entrees into the world of democracy. Elections were hotly contested events. Posters were glued to walls so they could not be removed by vandals. Those posters would often be still on the walls years later. Only rain and sunlight, or a completely fresh painting job could remove them. For weeks, long, violent debates would be held among the huge roots of the thick ficus berry trees that lined the Arts Courtyard. The political demarcations often duplicated the demarcations of national politics and these political parties would intensify this ideological rivalry by sponsoring candidates and sending strategists on campus to do both covert and overt campaign work. Manifestoes were published and distributed along with photographs of saintly looking students trying to find the smile that immediately translated into the words "Vote Me!".

Election debates were always crowded with students aching to ask tough questions like: "Is it true you beat your girlfriends?"; "How have your marks been this year?"; and "How do you spell 'misinformed'? You spelt it wrong in your manifesto." The counter bantering was often carefully orchestrated and was punctuated by loud cheering and hissing from the masses gathered in the building. The entire thing seemed somewhat disturbing to me. It was exciting; tempers flared; brilliant speeches were made; cheering, singing and chanting would permeate the hall; and every promise made by the candidates would be challenged, dissected, and fully scrutinized. As an audience member, you learned to hone your skills in identifying faulty logic and in discovering loopholes in whatever was said.

But the aggression and egomania that this style of politicking brought out often undermined whatever positive qualities that it possessed. Students would vote for personalities; picking men over women because of unenlightened concepts about gender; or omitting to elect otherwise excellent workers who could not boast the skills of public speaking and mass manipulation. The rhetoric of impossible promises, securely married to the more vitriolic rhetoric of "those before us did such a bad job we will just do better"; became the order of the day. Fools, incompetents and self-seeking egocentrics would walk into office on a whim.

After a year on campus, it became clear to me that election campaigns were very questionable events. After a year of seeing student government fail to meet up to any of their promises and hearing the new set of candidates making the same identical promises, it became apparent that this was nothing but a questionable ritual in which people sought power to beef-up that resume and mark out a path for greater political activity in the future. Like many of my fellow students, I became disillusioned and did not vote in my second year.

In my third, and final year as an undergraduate, I discovered that student government was too important to ignore. It was too important an institution to student life to be left to self-seeking political types. So I became an activist. I chose a politician who I thought possessed integrity, skill and a genuine vision for student life. She would be the first woman in over fifteen years, and the second in 30 years to become Guild (Union) President. The campaign was as bitter as ever, but it taught me much about the validity of the process. It taught me, also, that students must demand excellence from their leaders. When someone steps forward to lead; it is those who are led who must make it clear to the leader that they are to serve and not be served. I discovered that the investment of a vote gave the student a right to demand good, reliable and responsible service from the leaders.

If these student who have put their names forward for student office don't know it yet, it is time they realized that their role is primarily as servants of their fellow students. The job is not always rewarding but it is challenging and one that builds character. Perhaps when students begin to make the kind of investment in student politics that is needed, the combined pressure of a large and concerned electorate, as well as the double-edged support and endorsement of those who vote in the winners, will lead to more responsible and less self-serving student governments. The bottom line is that students should vote. No matter what is said about Wayne Carson's government, one thing must be said to their credit: Whether because of fear or appreciation students have seen student government to be worth running for. This year there are thankfully only a few council positions that will go uncontested. I will let the Carson regime have the pleasure of taking credit for this.

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