

EDITORIAL

Student government and national politics.

By Kwame Dawes

This summer has been a very eventful one for Canada. The dramatic developments of Meech Lake, followed by Canada's involvement in the Middle East crisis (which continues); and the difficult weeks of the Oka stand-off are all significantly historic events. The lengthy hiatus of the summer should have given student governments enough time to come up with some kind of position on these issues. The question is, should they take a position or make a statement of any kind on issues of this nature?

There exist several schools of thought on this question and they are worth exploring. On one hand, many argue that student politicians should concern themselves only with affairs that are directly related to students on their campuses. Political statements must be limited, therefore, to student issues and nothing else. According to this theory, student politicians are largely responsible to the students for administering the student fee that is collected each year. They are to provide services for students and uphold the interest of students on their campus. According to those who hold this position, stances on issues that are of a national or an international nature and that can't be seen to directly affect student affairs, must not be taken by politicians. It is these people who rose up in an uproar when two years ago Student Union President Dean Frost expressed support for Brian Mulroney during the elections campaigns. They also got very upset with James Gill last year when he, in a letter to the *Daily Gleaner*, on an AIDS related issue, signed his name along with his credentials as an officer of the Student Union. Both politicians apologized for their actions after the Student Union mandated that they did so.

Were they out of order in their actions? Some would argue that the support for a national political candidate or the lack thereof, has everything to do with student affairs. According to the argument, political leaders who are largely responsible for much of the education policies that affect students should be either challenged or supported by student politicians, in-keeping with their perception of the interests of the students that they lead. Last year, the UNB student Union supported the CFS in its "Mulroney-busters" campaign and its anti-GST battles. Admittedly, the UNB executive was not entirely militant about its positions on these issues nor did they allow their discussions to go beyond the concerns that directly affected students. When it came to other issues like the abortion issue they virtually balked. Eventually there was support for the CFS on its peculiarly middle-of-the-road stand on the issue. Despite this, the Student Union brought Morgentaler in as a special speaker during the latter half of the year. Perhaps without intending to, the Union was making a political statement on a national issue. Only a few people seemed to see the significance of these events.

Student elections are telling things because they demonstrate that the agenda of student politics is most often defined by the politics of patronage. In other words, it is hardly defined by ideological or political orientation, but more so on the capacity of the candidate to convince the electorate that he/she will do this and that for them. I have attended a number of public "debates" for UNB elections over the past few years and I have been struck by the fact that nobody asks these politicians about their position on women's affairs; abortion; racism in South Africa; the GST or any other national issue; native affairs; or who the current premiere of the province is. God forbid that the theories of economics like Marxism and Capitalism should come up for discussion at these events. Is it that these are not issues that affect students or is it simply that students really don't care about these issues because they (the issues) have nothing to do with their perception of the Canadian way of life?

The other type of politician would have real problems with that perspective. This politician is convinced that student politicians should regard their role as a combination of administrators and ideologues who shape the economy and social fabric of the university student community according to the ideas that they hold as features of valid political avenues for change. In their thinking, student politics must be seen as a microcosm of the larger government, albeit a very significant and potent microcosm. Many of these students look with pained longing at the militant style seen in students in third world countries, Eastern European nations and a few American Universities of the sixties and seventies. Tear-gassing, marching, dynamic campaigns for office and the inevitable elevation from mere student affairs to national affairs are things associated with such students. In that model, the student becomes a crucial instrument of social and political change because he/she is deemed equipped and ready to challenge the ancient and rigid regimes that fail to meet the needs of the people. The added respect that many of these societies place on students gives them a political might that frightens many governments.

Canadian students who are convinced that such a role by students is valid, would perhaps argue that students should take a stand, for instance, on the Oka issue and perhaps spearhead some political direction on the matter. They would further argue that such students should also make public their position on the Hussein/Bush crisis, and the *Daily Gleaner's* distinctive statements on the gay issue and so on. For these people, the powers that be must be forced to contend with the voice of students as a distinct and influential one.

One wonders what direction this new Student Union will take. They did send a representative to the Soweto Day rally held in Fredericton last Summer, but then South Africa is a fairly safe issue. Will anything be said about the Oka problems? Should anything be said? It is unlikely that either the *Brunswickan* or the Campus Radio station (CHSR FM) will ignore these issues because they are news worthy issues. But UNB has a number of native students and these students are represented by the politicians who hold office. Is this, then reason to encourage the politicians to make a statement?

The summer is over now indeed and students suddenly have an organized political voice to use or not use. I am genuinely curious as to how it will be used this year by our elected Student Government.

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