

COMMENTS & LETTERS

Failed Leadership: Who will fix it?



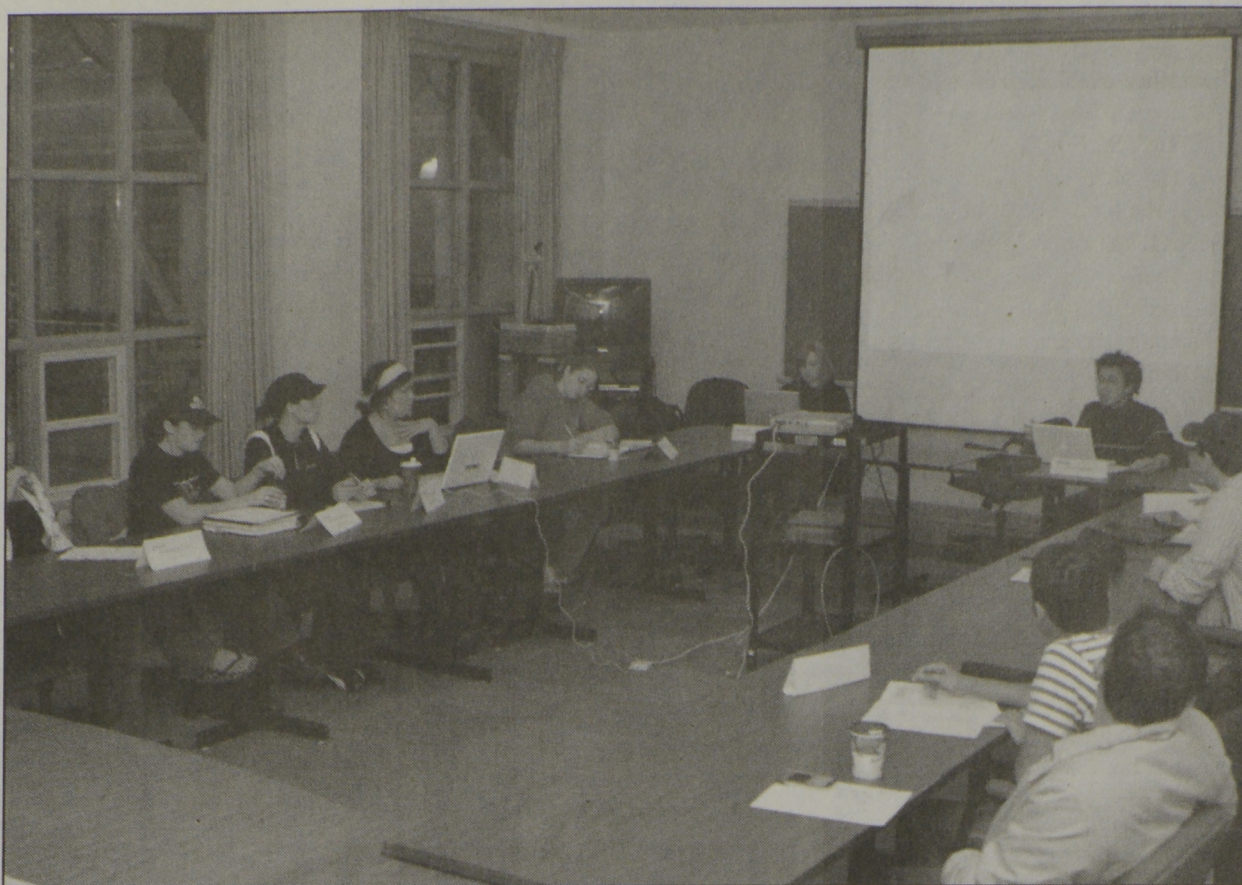
ROUSING THE RABBLES

by
Nick Ouellette

Obama. Clinton. McCain. Romney. Kucinich? Primary season is sweeping the US in the race for the presidency. Harper. Layton. Dion. Duceppe. May? Parliament reconvened this Monday with more uncertainty that comes with every minority government: When will it fall? The fever has once again taken hold of North America, and political junkies and pundits are invading the airwaves, newspapers, and blogosphere.

What they are not invading is The Brunswickian. Little wonder, though. Few would know it, but the Student Union annual general election starts soon. Nominations open Friday. Will you run? Most will say, 'No.' What's worse, they'll follow that with 'I don't care,' and why should they? The SU hasn't shown them anything that would make them care. Lacklustre performance emanates from the SU offices, and one of those offices in particular is the focal point of this dying star.

Despite successful VPs, the Union continues to struggle to relate to students. The Book Buy and Sell that VP Academic Bethany Vail organized has been the most successful story so far this year, more than tripling what students earned in the previous year. VP Student Services Keely Wallace has also brought innovation by tackling the re-establishment of the long-ago famed UNB Winter Carnival and starting a new program to help students cope with mental health issues. She's done something really amazing in her portfolio.



Andrew Meade / The Brunswickian

Members of the UNB Student Union have not worked to their potential this year, according to columnist Nick Ouellette.

Externally, VP Jordan Graham has his hands full with the fallout from the PSE Commission report and the proposed closure of UNBSJ, but he's managing it as well as can be expected in a government that has shut him out of the debate. His pedway issue is also important. Meanwhile, Mike Stockford has had an easy job managing the Union's money. The two previous Vice Presidents' Finance & Operations were cut costs to help pay off the Union's outstanding debt so well that they produced healthy surpluses that are now being used to establish a scholarship fund and an environmental trust fund, among other things. At least for now, the days are long gone when the SU has had to rely on the University to bail it out.

But awash as the Union is in cash, it suffers from a chronic deficit: relevance.

The issue is one of leadership. There isn't much of that happening at the Student Union now, and as successful as each of the VPs has been in their portfolios, it is clear that there is little to no coordination between their efforts. Each of their success stories has come about as the result of the initiative and determination of the person whose name is attached to the project, not any coordinated, long-term plan.

In working as a Senator, I spend a lot of time observing what happens on the second floor of the SUB. One thing has become abundantly clear to me: there is no vision and no organization at the Student Union, and there is little hope of it changing soon.

The responsibility for these shortcomings rests squarely on the President, Brad Mullins. His term offers little solace to a writer who has observed the

SU struggle with each of a six-figure annual deficit; consistent electoral turmoil; a lawsuit from a Vice President who was dismissed questionably; near-revolt when club funding was scaled back and attached to conditions those groups had never before experienced; and a corporate war with the company that runs the only truly-owned student bar on campus, The Cellar.

Yet even then, the Union managed to remain relevant and advance its interests. Even when political controversies and scandals screamed across the front pages of The Brunswickian, the President was able to control their organization and mould it in their visions. Those here long enough will recall that I disagreed on a number of points with former President Greg LeBlanc, particularly when it was discovered that his executive had overspent by about \$130,000.

But Greg had a vision, and he pursued it. And the Union, as indebted as it was, benefited.

And that's what it all comes down to: Vision. Vision instils goals and induces planning. It spawns success. But vision is not what we see today. Students routinely lament that the SU is useless, and only a handful will identify one or two good aspects of the SU. This is far from enough. The organization can positively influence every aspect of life at UNB. But it appears that this year is treated as a caretaker year, with the status quo maintained and an apprehension for innovation.

Even the most ambitious goal this year - the creation of a committee to examine how the Union communicates with students - is destined to fail. It was struck in September, but has met only once - in December - and nothing has been acted upon. When asked last week about this, President Mullins responded that he was planning a meeting soon; there was no update on progress. A notice of meeting still has not been issued. This is not surprising. It is consistent with the lack of organization since May 1st, when Mullins took office. Weekly meetings of the President and Vice Presidents did not occur for the longest while, and are now scheduled on what appears to be an ad hoc, last-minute basis. It is both unfortunate and regretful, because the caretaker President is himself the problem.

Yet the hands of the Council are not clean in this deference to inaction. Few Councillors routinely pose questions to the Executive to determine what the Union is doing or could do better. It has passed two sets of by-law amendments with nary a word of debate, even though they radically altered election campaign regulations. They receive and often approve financial proposals without much thought and critical analysis, and complacently accept the lack of reporting from the Executive to the Council. Executive reports routinely arrive late or not at all. A complete sum-

mary of summer activities has yet to be received, and weekly updates were rarely issued. Activities were stalled while the Council struggled to hire its most basic and important positions: Chairperson, Secretary, Chief Returning Officer, and Deputy Chief Returning Officer.

The Council willingly accepts its own shortfalls, and has difficulty even holding a meeting. It is always an open question whether quorum is present, and its only solution was to dismiss a councillor who wasn't attending in order to lower quorum by one.

How can this Council hope to ensure that the Executives act prudently? The Council itself is imprudent. Inaction, once the exception, is now the general rule. Induced by and compounded by Mullins' lack of leadership and vision, the SU is in a freefall from relevance, and is at a critical juncture.

This Friday, nominations open for new Councillors and Executive members. Will you run? This plea is to students who have noticed that their SU is not representing them. Recognize the opportunity, embrace it, and put your name forward, but the half-hearted need not apply. Another year should not pass where wonderful Vice Presidents like Vail, Wallace, Graham, and Stockford fend for themselves in unorganized disarray. Real leadership is needed in the Presidency, and nothing less than a Council willing to vigorously hold him or her to account is desirable.

The SU can become relevant to students again and return itself to a status that provides entertainment, value, and advocacy for students under a real mandate. It can be something that students look to with pride, not scorn, but only if the right people, with vision, are elected. Are you one of those people?

Nick Ouellette, a UNB law student, has served on the UNB Student Union Council and the UNB Board of Governors, and now serves on the UNB Fredericton Senate and as an Assistant Don in UNB's Residence Community.

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WHAT A JERK.

By Chris Nyarady UNB

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BRONWYN GALLAGHER (TEXTILES MAJOR) PHOTOGRAPHED BY FELLOW STUDENT CHANTAL ARSENAU (PHOTOGRAPHY MAJOR)

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