

Hampered by split What should AFS be doing?

by Mark King, Atlantic Bureau Chief, Canadian University Press

Last week, a group of student union presidents from eight Maritime colleges met to ostensibly discuss matters they felt were pertinent to themselves as presidents and to student councils generally.

Rather than talking about issues that might be more relevant to such a group, such as entertainment, services, and finances, the meeting dealt entirely with the Atlantic Federation of Students (AFS).

The meeting curiously enough, produced little: after reviewing the entire proposed AFS constitution (AFS is still without one), they agreed on some minor changes concerning financial controls and paying the executive honoraria; perhaps the most significant outcome of the session, they agreed not to hire a staffperson unless they could "afford" it.

The meeting was not a random occurrence. Student union presidents at maritime universities have been corresponding regularly since July, largely through the initiation of Robert Sampson, the president of the Dalhousie Student Union.

Sampson's original letter, sent to all council presidents in the Atlantic Region, suggested the presidents get together and "gather their thoughts" to deal with some of the major problems in the region, in particular the direction of AFS and NUS.

The intention to consider the larger problems and to get union presidents together to deal with other matters that may not necessarily concern NUS and AFS,

is the kind of communication and exchange that can be valuable and help strengthen each individual union.

Questionable, though, is the attitude Sampson seems to hold regarding the position of a student union president. As he put it in his

letter: "We as presidents are supposed to be one of the more if not most knowledgeable persons about our student union, campus and external affairs....However what I feel AFS and each and every one of

our own student councils need is proper guidance, leadership, knowledge, etc."

That a student union president consciously and willingly accepts his role, is the least that can be expected and is admirable when done well. Yet the attitude that lies behind the words implies the president of the student union is the titular head of all students. That

sort of attitude verges on a brand of elitism that is all at once deplorable and amusing, distinctly reminiscent of the kind of attitude displayed by the condescending politicians who so often wield the power in this country. In a student context however, that sort of feeling is, above all else, patently unrealistic.

As various student council presidents and other elected officials replied to Sampson it was apparent they were of like sentiment, particularly on the question of AFS. Most implied or openly stated they agreed with Sampson's assertion that the presidents should be the ones to decide AFS policy and not,

as he saw it, the other way around. The positive response to the letter and some further communication eventually led to what is being referred to as the "infamous presidents' meeting", held last weekend.



McGibbon: he attended

The question easily posed here is whether the presidents are really concerned about the continued existence of AFS, or are they trying to burrow into the organization for the purpose of simply taking over the organization.

Sampson, who constantly reappears as the chief antagonist in this whole affair, seems to believe AFS is facing serious problems, particularly in three main areas: finances—financial statements were four months' late; continuity—the staffperson resigned during the summer; and inaction—as far as he is concerned, nothing is being done.

Don Soucy, Secretary Co-ordinator of AFS and by all accounts the chief protagonist in the current melee, is understandably skeptical about Sampson's concern. He admits the financial statements were late and the books have yet to be seen. However, he feels a certain amount of inexperience and ineptness by the AFS treasurer, combined with totally unrealistic standards set on financial reporting were greatly to blame.

The staffperson, Susan Kenney, resigned in her own words "because I wasn't being paid and I knew I wasn't going to be paid".

Soucy seems to feel that Sampson, by leading "the other side", (they both agree on that point at least) is trying to create a personality conflict to obscure the real issue: a political attack on the organization. Sampson, however, doesn't seem to believe the difference is personalities, but like Soucy, he sees it as politics.

And politics it is; about as divergent as one would care to imagine.

November 1976 was the turning point for AFS when student representatives from most Atlantic universities met and decided that the Federation, as it existed at that point was generally ineffective, and that the only future was to create a secure financial base, rent an office, and hire a full-time staffperson.

Objectives for the regional federation were explicitly understood: with regional coordination of policy decisions affecting

post-secondary education, and increasing government cutbacks in social services directly affecting higher education, a student federation was necessary to lobby and organize students around the issues to ensure the student view was not ignored.

The per capita fee was the only real way to a stable financial base, and the ensuing continuity the organization would need to guarantee its effectiveness.

This year, for all intents and purposes, is the first year of operations for AFS. The money used to run referenda last winter was borrowed with the understanding the debt would be repaid from incoming student fees from the 12 member campuses.

Apparently no one has any real objections to the existence of a regional federation and its goals; the split is a difference of opinion based on methods.

Soucy remains adamant. "The only way to realize the objectives of the organization is through a grass roots coalition of interested and concerned students on the local campuses." Those students would examine the effects of the larger regional issues and organize students to constructive work and research; that local work would then be coordinated and compiled regionally.

Sampson on the other hand, believes direct, polite, and constructive dialogue with bureaucrats is the best way to lobby for student concerns.

The difference ideally is inherently ideological, but Soucy questions Sampson's real motives. The contrast between the two in politics and personality is dramatic. Soucy, a member of the National Union of Students Central Committee, External Vice-president at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and the driving force behind AFS, sees the government educational bureaucracy creating an elitist system making higher education inaccessible to those without the financial resources necessary to spend years in college.

At the other extreme is Sampson, a traditionalist with political affiliations that go beyond the student arena, a successful entrepreneur with business interests in Cape Breton, a person who sees AFS and

with sincere concern for the interests of students but unfortunately limited by a larger concern for the public interest.

The whole basis, however, of the major thrust to boost the federation last year was out of a recognition of the necessity for action along the lines Soucy advocates.

Before last November AFS existed for two years as an organization without financial resources, structure, or policy, and tended to become an occasional gathering of student council hacks whose most productive activity was socializing.

Soucy quite credibly sees Sampson's position as a threat to return the organization to that kind of status quo which would all but eliminate any semblance of political effectiveness it ever had.

Students at over a dozen Atlantic universities pay a dollar a year to support AFS. Whatever their feeling on what AFS should be doing, they should decide that, make sure the representatives know that, and then do it

Capt. Submarine

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