

NEWS

Debate over Student Union's Withdrawal from CFS Continues

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News Editor



The debate over the Student Union's withdrawal from the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) has heated up recently. Three weeks ago at a Student Council meeting, graduate student Faiz Ahmed led a group of around 25 students protesting the Student Council's decision to end its relationship with the CFS and calling for a referendum to let the students decide.

"We don't want the Student Council to decide," Ahmed said, who also collected a petition with 77 signatures. "We want both CFS and CASA (Canadian Alliance of Student Associations) to come to the campus, make their pitches, and let the students decide in a referendum."

This is only the continuation of an almost decade long debate at UPEI. Over the past eight years, Student Council has frequently questioned its relationship with the CFS. In 1996, a referendum was held with a massive majority (261 to 91) voting to leave the CFS. However, the CFS claimed election irregularities nullified the results and threatened to take the UPEI Student Union to court if they attempted to de-federate from CFS. The Student Union stood down and remained members of CFS.

The latest chapter in the saga started in February, when Student Council gave the Student Union Executive Committee approval to examine the relationship between the Student Union and the CFS. Two months later in April, 2003-04 Student Union President, Brandon MacKenzie, completed a nineteen page report

which was endorsed by the Executive Committee. The report concluded that the CFS was deviating from their founding principles, inadequate regional representation exists within the CFS and their actions following the 1996 referendum with the Student Union have been seriously misdirected.

In April, Student Council voted to sever all relations between the

currently involved in a lawsuit but would not comment further on legal issues.

Ryan Palmer is a Student Councillor who has attempted to reopen the debate to student council and the student body. He takes issue with the report by past President Brandon MacKenzie, claiming that it took quotes from the CFS out of context while citing examples of the CFS deviating from founding principles by straying from student issues and taking left-wing stands on other divisive political issues such as the War in Iraq, NAFTA and FTAA.

"I'd love to see where these quotes came from," Palmer said. "The integrity of this report isn't questioned enough."

Henderson stands by the report, claiming the report was carefully presented adding, "I don't see how [the report] could have been less biased."

She also stands by the decision made by council in the spring to leave the CFS, explaining, "In the past our relationship with the CFS has not fit with our Student Union. The representation in the CFS isn't of enough benefit and we are not satisfied with the relationship." She went on to say that Student Council is exploring the idea of joining CASA and that more student input is wanted, encouraging students to talk to their student councillors about issues concerning CFS and CASA.

Ahmed claims that the CFS is the only national student body that takes an active lobbying role, adding that all the universities and colleges in Newfoundland are CFS members and have been able to persuade the government to actually reduce tuition fees in the last few years. He claims the

students of UPEI has a great opportunity to influence the provincial government since it is the sole university in the province.

"If we were actively engaged in the political campaigns of the CFS, like the campaign to freeze tuition fees, people would have to listen to us," he claimed.

Henderson argued that this has been attempted and that the CFS 'Day of Action' has not garnered much support from UPEI students, with only 30 to 40 students usually taking part in these campaigns.

Here at UPEI, this issue has taken a considerable amount of time in Student Council and it is time to move on, Henderson said, adding, "it is not the most important issue we should be dealing with and it can't keep coming up."

However, history shows this issue may linger for much longer. Other universities have had problems while attempting to leave the CFS. The CFS is suing the University of Acadia's Student Union for uncollected membership fees. The students in Acadia voted to leave the CFS eight years ago, but the CFS claims the requirements for a legitimate separation referendum were not met. In the spring, last year's Acadia Student Union President Dan O'Rourke told the Cadre that it is ridiculous that an organization claiming to represent students concerns would sue a Student Union for almost a quarter of million dollars.

(For further information on this issue, visit the CFS website, www.cfs-fcee.ca and visit www.upeisu.com/minutes.asp to view the UPEI Student Union report.)

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-Clare Henderson**

Student Union and the CFS, claiming there was no legal contract committing the Student Union to the CFS and therefore UPEI Student Union was never a member of the CFS. To this date, the CFS has failed to come up with a valid contract between the two organizations. The report recommended this course of action, claiming the CFS has a history of not recognizing unfavorable referenda results and the CFS would likely not recognize results from the UPEI Student Union's online voting system.

Student Union President Clare Henderson told the Cadre that the Student Union has stopped paying membership fees of \$7 per student to the CFS this year and the response from CFS is being dealt with the Student Union's legal counsel. She added that the Student Union is not