

The Canadian Federation of Students

Students in Canada have organized under a number of different names - NFCUS, CUS, NUS and, for almost nine years, the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS). Interspersed are a proliferation of provincial organizations, some affiliated, some part of, still others opposed to the CFS. The years have rolled on and the original goal of one national federation of all students remains unfulfilled. This week's CFS meeting in Ottawa may signal a fundamental change in the federation's direction, if, as some expect, delegates reject an incentive plan for provincial federations that merge with CFS. This feature examines the battle for unity among Canadian students.

Editor's note: The CFS meeting goes from Nov. 5 to Nov. 11 and will be attended by Lisa Murphy, UPEI SU President.

By Chris Lawson Canadian University Press

Five minutes before its meeting ended, the Canadian Federation of Students' budget for 1989/90 came up for discussion.

About 200 student leaders - delegates to CFS' eighth annual general meeting last May, in Sackville New Brunswick - sat behind rows of tables, faces awash with a mixture of fatigue and tension.

The budget had been the subject of many hours of debate and negotiation in committees, hallways, and the student pub at Mount Allison University.

And now, as university staff prepared the final banquet, it was to have five short minutes on the plenary floor.

One association called for the budget to be approved in total.

Then, calmly, politely, University of Waterloo student council delegate Tim Jackson moved to strike a single expense - rebates for provincial components.

And suddenly the excited din of two hundred student leaders, staff and observers, eager to have the business over-with, fell to near silence.

A deal was off. Some British Columbia delegates were visibly enraged, and there were two minutes left in the plenary.

Strange Alliances

The meeting ended before the federation could approve a budget, and without answering fundamental questions about how Canadian students are represented.

Delegates from CFS-Pacific had paid a special visit to a CFS

Ontario region meeting the night before, which went into the early hours of the morning.

The meeting was B.C.'s attempt to get support for a rebate plan, which would have given it (and other provincial 'components') 50 cents for every student at a CFS-member association. For B.C., that would mean about \$45,000 per year.

With painstaking tact CFS-Pacific chair Pam Frache and Vancouver Community College-Langara delegate Phil Link explained why B.C. - not generally an ally of Ontario in CFS - wanted the rebate from CFS's federal budget and why Ontario should support them.

In return, Ontario delegates, also part of the Ontario Federation of Students (OFS), would get the Pacific's support for a proposal to reimburse OFS for some staff salaries for doing CFS work.

Or at least, that was the deal.

But what came up for a vote wasn't what either side had wanted. The rebate proposal was for a 10 cent per student rebate to CFS provincial components. The proposed budget also gave some money for CFS referenda in Ontario and B.C. and gave Ontario about \$4,100 to pay for Ontario staff travel to CFS meetings.

And while B.C. could live with what they saw as a symbolic gesture to reimburse them for their work for CFS, Jackson and other Ontario delegates had the distinct impression they had been left out.

The two regions often find they have little in common, except on the issue of 'national development'.

Both the CFS-Pacific and OFS members who are part of CFS pay into the federation's budget. They subsidize the costs of CFS staff who travel to the rest of the country, while they pay for their own staff people, who often look after CFS business. It's a situation both want to see corrected.

The One Big Federation

Founders of the Canadian Federation of Students had hoped to create a single student federation, with partially autonomous provincial organizations, called components, to work on provincial issues.

Each component would have their own fee, their own staff and their own policy and strategy. But the components would also collect national fees and membership would mean belonging to the provincial and federal organiza-

tions or none at all.

The national office would be responsible for research and lobbying on Parliament Hill, while the 'congruent' provincial components worked on their the legislators however they saw fit - all as the Canadian Federation of Students.

Almost nine years later, there are only three components out of a possible nine in the CFS. A former CFS chair said the situation now was "all over the map. It's worse than Meech Lake."

Most provinces have independent provincial student federations in them. Some, provincial groups, like the Ontario Federation of Students, are large-budgeted federations, closely tied with CFS. Others, like the Manitoba Alliance of University Students are loose linkings of student councils that won't go to meetings when CFS reps are there.

Only in Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and British Columbia must members of the provincial federation be members of the CFS.

Of the three, only B.C. has a separate fee levy, and their own staff.

In Newfoundland, the Newfoundland-Labrador Federation of Students which recently got its first full-member when Memorial University students voted to join, has no plans to become congruent, chair Bruce Belbin said.

All student associations in the Students' Union of Nova Scotia (SUNS) area also CFS members. But the organization isn't a CFS component, and likely won't be.

"A big concern for us is a loss of identity," Mike Wallace, Nova Scotia rep for CFS' national executive. "(SUNS is) older than CFS."

"What we have now works," he added.

Divisive Issues

CFS-Pacific chair Pam Frache calls their rebate proposal for components an incentive for regions to develop the kind of organization the federation had originally planned.

"When a province got together to plan their federation, they would know that there would be money from the federation budget there to help them out," she told a CFS national executive meeting in October.

"Right now, a province knows if it becomes a component all that will happen is they'll end up subsidizing the rest of the country,"

she said.

The rebate also compensates for work the provinces do in the name of CFS, Frache said.

While the Pacific wants to see provinces becoming components, they also want financial relief. When they incorporated as the CFS' Pacific region in 1982, they set their per-student fee at \$3.75 per semester, which in retrospect, may have been too low.

Now, faced with an understaffed regional office, the rebate proposal would give them enough cash to add another staff position.

To make matters worse, the Pacific region is facing a large membership problem in the form of the students association at Simon Fraser University.

The student council executive will run a referendum to pull out of CFS in the spring, mostly because they have been dissatisfied with the national organization's work. According to the CFS-Pacific constitution, SFU will have to drop out of both the Pacific and CFS, taking about a third of the Pacific region's revenue with it.

But members of SFU's council have said they want to remain part of the Pacific federation. To allow this, Frache said CFS-Pacific would have to break congruency and become the BC Federation of Students.

While it's not a desirable goal, Frache said the Pacific region's finances may not leave them much choice.

Unequal division of labour

Ontario is not congruent, but through a working agreement between the Ontario Federation of Students and CFS, it carries more than its fair share of the load in CFS.

OFS shares its research, lobbying responsibilities and field staff with CFS. The system works - except all OFS members pay the field staff, but not all are in the CFS, nor do all of them want to be.

If CFS is running a membership referendum on an OFS campus, OFS staff cannot oppose the CFS, according to the agreement, even if the OFS-member student council opposes CFS.

"This makes for some really complicated situations," OFS chair Edith Garneau said.

As well, Ontario CFS members pay for their own field staff while helping pay for CFS staff in every other region. It's the extra contribution Tim Jackson wanted

to see recognized.

"The rebate proposal is not a good one," Jackson said, "but there needs to be some recognition that work is being done on a provincial level for a national body."

Jackson would like to see CFS give back about \$30,000 in recognition.

OFS has no position on how much - if any - compensation it should get from CFS, beyond what is set out in the CFS-OFS working agreement, Garneau said.

And while the Ontario federation could use the money, Garneau said money isn't the issue.

"There are always ways of sorting out finances," she said. "The principle of how the federation is structured must come first."

Garneau said the rebate would cause Ontario problems because even though OFS contributes more than its fair share to CFS, the rebate wouldn't compensate Ontario because it's not congruent.

She said the rebate would also hurt small provinces because the per-student rebate wouldn't be enough to establish an effective provincial organization.

What Happened to Congruency?

In 1981, CFS' founders said the one-big-federation would have to develop quickly, or inertia and turnover among student leaders would make it impossible to attain.

The CFS national executive reaffirmed - unanimously - the principle of congruent federations last month, right after at least half the executives around the meeting table said it wouldn't be possible in their province in the near future, if at all.

Some provincial organizations see congruency as a surrendering of their identity and autonomy. Others just don't like being told what to do.

In Alberta, political lines are drawn up around opposition or support for CFS. Pro-CFS student councils are a minority.

"The feeling of being Canadian just isn't there," said CFS Alberta national executive Hugh Leighton. "Being Canadian means being from Ontario."

"What we want basically is 'hands off Alberta'," he said. "We don't want the impression of an outside model being forced upon us."