

ANDREW BRETT



Andrew Brett is a queer activist in Toronto. Follow him on Twitter: [@andrewbrett](#)

# Right-wing reform package defeated at CFS meeting

BY ANDREW BRETT | DECEMBER 1, 2009

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At last week's national general meeting of the Canadian Federation of Students, delegates rejected a series of motions put forward by members participating in a coordinated defederation campaign against the student organization.

Months ago, I [wrote](#) about workshops the Conservative Party was organizing across the country, training their members on how to defund progressive campus groups like Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) and defederate from the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS).

Since then, petitions have been circulating on numerous campuses to defederate from the CFS – the student version of the Canadian Labour Congress – which federates over 80 students' unions across the country.

A more surprising development has been the recent participation in these defederation efforts from self-described progressive students. An "Open Letter from the Left to the Canadian Federation of Students" was published online by Concordia University student Lex Gill in October of this year, supporting defederation campaigns against the CFS. The letter was written in response to an article penned by Toronto Coalition to Stop the War activist James Clark, in support of a pan-Canadian student organization.

But was this open letter actually coming from the left?

The letter put forward arguments against the CFS that students are used to hearing from conservatives on their campuses, advocating the depoliticization of student organizations.

Here's an excerpt: "No matter what we think about Palestine, copyright, gender, Cuba, abortion, or land claims it is unrepresentative to speak for all students on such divisive issues."

I'm not exactly sure what's so divisive about copyright, but I guess it would be irresponsible for the student movement to alienate the recording industry in favour of students' right to access information.

[Brian Latour](#) at Canadian Dimension does a great job refuting the article from a left perspective, so I'll just link to his response.

A few students signed on to Lex Gill's open letter, most of them members of the Concordia Students' Union. That student union supported a series of resolutions at last week's Annual General Meeting of the CFS in a so-called "reform package," ostensibly to

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democratize the organization.

However, most of the motions are just as right-wing as the so-called "open letter from the left".

Several of the motions would have removed decision-making powers from elected representatives and placed them in boards selected by lottery.

Other motions attempted to undermine the working conditions of the organization, where staff members are unionized with CUPE. One of the "reform package" motions was to fire a unionized staff member and another was to pay minimum wages to the national executive.

In order to avoid union grievances filed by their staff, the elected leadership of the CFS ruled one motion out of order for violating the collective agreement. They asked the movers of this motion to sign an agreement stating that they would assume responsibility if their motions or actions during the meeting resulted in a union grievance.

"Open letter" signatory **Beisan Zubi** was one of the Concordia students asked to sign this agreement, in response to the anti-worker motion seconded by her student union. In her recollection of the meeting, she refused to sign the agreement, which she deemed "inappropriate."

Although the Concordia Student Union seconded the "reform package," it was officially submitted by the Post-Graduate Students' Society (PGSS) of McGill University.

To support its motion at the meeting, the PGSS sent three delegates who were not members of their student union to represent McGill graduate students. One of them was Jose Barrios, a University of Victoria defederation activist flown in from British Columbia; another was Dean Tester, a conservative student at Carleton University and owner of [www.alwaysright.ca](http://www.alwaysright.ca).

Some PGSS members were surprised to learn that their student union was paying delegate fees for an unholy alliance of grievance mongers who weren't even McGill graduate students.

"PGSS Council never approved the outside reps being brought, nor has PGSS Council ever approved the reform package," says McGill graduate student Paul Sutton. "It's anti-democratic by definition."

For a student union that is eager to offer suggestions for democratic reform, it looks like they have a lot of work to do reforming their own practices.

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## COMMENTS

Submitted by Plink on January 14, 2010 - 5:02pm.

I'd like to dispell the belief that anyone wishing to defederate from the Canadian Federation of Students is a right winger. To the contrary the CFS has actually been taken over by right wingers. Here's the simple proof: in 2004 the Concordia Student Union was taken over by a very corrupt slate called "Evolution not Revolution." The slate was set up to get rid of the leftist dynasty that ran the CSU for 7 years before that. Evolution not Revolution was a hard right wing slate (Evolution not revolution being a theme that was used by fascists for decades) which sought power to first and foremost stop criticism of Israel on campus. The slate was supported by the CFS for many years.

In 2005 Evolution's president was Brent Farrington. Farrington worked with Steven Rosenshein and later with Noah Stewart Ornstein in successive campaigns for many years. One year, a former CSU executive of the Evolution slate (name later changed to Experience and then Unity) stated that the slate was helped by Concordia University's administration. The same administration that privatized international student tuition fees and fought publicly in the press and even in the Quebec National Assembly to raise tuition. The slate even campaigned that they were going to improve the value of Concordia students' degrees. They stated that the demonstration against the speech by Bejamin Netanyahu drew negative attention and reduced the value of Concordia students' degrees and that voting for the Evolution slate would improve Concordia's image by keeping out the leftists. They also succeeded in almost

completely depoliticizing Concordia, which until then was often referred to as the Berkeley of the 21st century. They sought to defund progressive groups on campus and visited classrooms telling students that if the leftists got into power again they would once again start using the student union to fund riots.

CSU right wingers Brent Farrington, Noah Stewart Ornstein, and Steven Rosenshein all managed to repackage themselves and became executives at the CFS. This despite that fact that they were in bed with Concordia's administration the entire time that they were at the CSU, working hand-in-hand to make sure that student interests were ignored and the left at Concordia was not funded.

Intrestingly enough the CFS' Brent Farrington, a former U.S. resident has supported U.S. Republicans, yes the United States Republican Party, you know Rush Limbaugh, George Bush, Sarah Palin!

Right now the CFS spends very, very little as a percentage of their overall budget on actual campaigns. Also, I believe it is no coincidence that the CFS is a shell of it former self with such right wingers involved. The CFS talks a good talk, but seldom puts its money where its mouth is. It is no coincidence that tuition fees across the country have been rising at an alarming rate. A federation that has done so little over the years is Harper's best friend.

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Submitted by KelseyH on December 2, 2009 - 3:13pm.

Lioness, if you think that the Montreal leftists are the only game in town on the left, then you are very, very wrong. A lot of the uniting issues that the CFS refuses to deal with (judicial board, etc) are ones divide more on a Top-down/Accountable spectrum versus a left/right spectrum. That's why you're seeing so many right wing and left wing work together--it's like marijuana legalization with social democrats and libertarians, both unite on the issue despite differing opinions on other issues.

For the record about the so called "right winger" PGSS delegate from Victoria. The person sent, Jose Barrios, who is the lead petitioner at UVic, lead an impeachment against the student society executives to resolve our student union strike faster for better wages. How many "right wingers" do you know put their neck out on the line like that for labour rights?! Seriously, does this look "right wing" shit to you?!: <http://www.martlet.ca/article/4651-petition-threatens-board>

At UVic, the people petitioning come from a very diverse group of political ideologies. I'm not kidding, from libertarians to people with disabilities to Women Centre coordinators, it's a broad coalition of people who all see the benefit in leaving. And generally speaking, most actually come from the left. For example, the UVic Grad President who led the charge for the Grads to leave was a Young New Democrat!

Say what you want about a "united front," but we have enough problems over here at UVic to settle on our own. We have a \$300,000+ deficit to work on while students still keep shipping \$200,000+ over to the CFS every year with little results. We also have a ton of suspected and confirmed examples of CFS interference into our already scandalous elections, not to mention at our AGMs and other forms of governance over the years. To put it bluntly, most of us are tired of this shit and simply want out now that reform is impossible.

I'm not sure how the game is played in the east, but over here the CFS is a top down organization. Go ask CFS-BC why they won't sit Derek Robertson on the CFS-BC campaign committee, and explain to me how denying Kwantlen's right to elect their rep somehow constitutes as "left wing." Or go ask CFS-BC why they are so ready to sue every student union into oblivion instead of doing what's best for students, ie, SFU's referendum court case. That case is going to trial and could easily cost over \$50,000 in legal fees all paid for by students.

Any grassroots activist still left at UVic has moved against the CFS. The only people who are still resisting at this point are what you could label "the establishment left"--often people who have YND connections or career progression goals later in life. The only actual support the CFS has on campus will come from people who are new to campus, and get bought over by the cheap gimmicky material before really getting hear a story of how the CFS actually operates. Because it's just a matter of getting them informaed, you would not believe how high our conversion rates to anti-CFS are when we actually get to talk to people about the issue for two minutes.

And for the record, I don't know a single credible environmentalist on this campus who thinks that putting up a bunch of glossy posters on walls that say "Students for Sustainability" is helping to do anything.

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Submitted by Lioness on December 1, 2009 - 3:41pm.

In addition to above I feel like even some recent examples in British Columbia to what the Gordon Campell Liberals were able to get away with in the province with respect to universities and colleges speaks to how splitered and devided the CFS and attempts to organize are there right now. On the first day of voting at SFU on membership in the CFS the government announces sweeping cuts to the sector. Faculty, staff, libraries, facilities would all be reduced.

That wasn't a mistake to pull that just when one of the more historically well-organized groups in the province on PSE was consumed with in-fighting.

In Ontario when the half dozen or so students' unions split away from the CFS to form the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance in the 1994 it proved to be perfect fodor for the soon

elected Mike Harris government to legitimize their regressive policies. OUSA was more than happy to let the government off the hook and delegitimize the work of the more critical CFS. In Quebec after the student strike in 2005 the divisions between FEUQ and ASSE grew increasingly wide and hostile, which meant there was no well coordinated response to the Charest government when they decided to lift the tuition fees freeze.

History is pretty clear: when students, for whatever reasons, decide to split themselves up there is usually one primary beneficiary: regressive provincial and federal governments.

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Submitted by Lioness on December 1, 2009 - 3:23pm.

Ok, so honestly both sides of this whole CFS debate need to take a step back. Is the CFS perfect? I severely doubt many people except the most diehard loyalists would say "yes!". But what's happening at Concordia, and what happened previously at other school such as Simon Fraser, is that a collection of leftists with some grievances with their students' union team up with conservatives and liberals who want to depoliticize, marginalize and mollify the students' union. At SFU this meant impeaching executives, running a bitter anti-CFS campaign, and attacking almost anyone deemed "too CFS". Throughout it all progressives would argue on the campus, in media, and at CFS meetings that they just wanted to reform it - they wanted to great a more "grassroots" organization at SFU and in the CFS.

What is SFU and the Simon Fraser Student Society like now? Well its run by a bunch of people who mainly identify as BC Liberals and federal Conservatives. While UBC's more historically conservative students' union is putting forward progressive ideas around tuition fees and funding, the best SFU can pull off is a "pumpkin carving against funding cuts!" halloween event. The toxic environment created for anyone thought to be progressive has allowed for libertarians, conservatives and liberals to gain control of the students' union and campus media.

What is important to note about SFU too is that in an attempt to cripple the organization provincially they coordinated and worked with a number of people across the province to try to get multiple referendums running in BC at the same time. The people at Concordia, along with the grads at McGill, appear to have learned these lessons and have gone national. This time coordinating campaigns to decertify unions from UVic to Carleton to Guelph to Regina.

This isn't some "grassroots" campaign designed to bring reform like some more idealistic people at Concordia would claim but part of a concerted effort to cripple and perhaps destroy one of the few progressive organizations in post-secondary education today.

Student organizing in Canada has been here before. In the late 1960s the Canadian Union of Students (CUS) was torn apart when conservatives and "radical" leftists began to attack it simultaneously. Parts of those campaigns includes some oddly similar demands to what's coming from Concordia this time, such as to devide services and political organizing into two separte organizations. In 1969 CUS collapsed and for over a decade students in Canada were left with a patchwork of organizations and little effective leadership nationally.

Now this time out there isn't a vacuum in organizing federally. If this crew of people get their way then the CFS comes out of these battles severely weakened and the right-wing Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (created after a similar coordinated attack in the early 1990s) will gladly fill the void with its refusal to participate in broader campaign, mobilize its members for actions, advocating for income contingent loans and justifying tuition fees hikes.

Now, that if that's "progressive" then i think people need to perhaps reanalyze their politics. Destroying or weakening the CLC, OFL, BC Fed of Labour or any similar organizations is not going create for a more "grassroots" or "democratic" labour movement. it will only help to deminish working peoples' and union members' attempts to fight back against neoliberalism. Students may suffer a fate of weakened and deminished progressive leadership just in a time when post-secondary education is under one of hte most concerted attacks across Canada.

Besian, and her collection of Montreal "leftists", need to pause and reanalyze the kind of damage they're pushing through cloaked in the vague terminology of "democracy", "transparency" and "grassroots".

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Submitted by biko on December 1, 2009 - 2:31pm.

So just to clarify then: you don't think there is anything wrong with a few executives of a students union unilaterally making a decision to use their members money to send non-students as the representatives of their members? There's nothing wrong with bypassing the democratic structures of the Students' Union Council (usually the highest decision-making body in any local students organisation) on issues such as who is your delegation or what motions you want to present?

I'm not sure if you are entirely aware of what a general meeting is then. Usually, its when democratically elected student representatives converge to discuss issues pertinent to their constituents and the broader student movement. Thus, if a delegation comes from the Ontario College or Art and Design, they are there to represent students at that institution. So then, logically, it makes little sense as to why PGSS would send a delegation that included people who neither paid a levy to the union, nor attended the institution, nor resided in the province in which that institution is located.

For all of your complaints about 'democracy' in the CFS, you seem to be particularly silent about-even willing to tolerate-its subversion in other places so long as it serves your own purposes. No matter how just you believe your cause to be, if the authors of a reform package cannot even muster up enough of its own members to speak to those reforms, theres something fundamentally wrong with that cause. But then again, who's to say they

even tried to seek members input? After all, they did do away with those little formalities like a council meeting or membership representation in their delegation.

This is an issue that you can't divorce yourself from. If you believe in democracy, it means you believe in it full stop. At the national level of the student movement, right down to the campus student union.

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Submitted by Beisan Zubi on December 1, 2009 - 2:07pm.

First of all I do not identify as apolitical. Anything but.

As well, I would like commenters, if engaging me personally, to engage me on MY actions and MY beliefs, not of those they assume to be of others they assume to be in cahoots with me.

I have remained silent on the PGSS delegation because I don't think there is anything wrong with them sending whoever they want to that meeting. There were multiple CFS staff members, union employees and non-students in attendance and the PGSS delegates were very respectful (as opposed to the some members of the national executive who seem to think political debate involves personal and psychological attacks). I don't got to McGill and if the folks there are pissed about that, let them have their say, but don't project your anger onto them. I also think your allegation that "most" of the PGSS delegation isn't from the PGSS is incorrect and would request you look further into that claim.

I have absolutely nothing to do with the PGSS. I came to the meeting as a representative from Concordia and was treated like absolute shit. So no matter what you think my right-wing support equals, the fact of the matter is if I cannot criticise and attempt to reform a left wing institution, no matter how progressive it is, there is something fundamentally wrong with that organization.

I always knew that my critique of the orgnization would lead to a critique of myself, but where is the critical thought left in the left?? A judicial board, conflict of interest policy, debt forgiveness and open media policy ARE NOT NOW NOR HAVE THEY EVER BEEN right wing concepts. Let us not allow our personal allegiances get in the way of our ability to discern right from WRONG.

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Submitted by biko on December 1, 2009 - 1:56pm.

Jimmy, couldn't have said it better myself.

Beisan, you may identify as left, progressive, apolitical-but your association with right-wing campus forces seeking to derail progressive student activism doesn't help your cause. This attack isn't just damaging to the national student movement, but its also damaging to any kind of progressive student organising. The same people pushing for this 'reform' movement were the ones trying to defund PIRGs in BC, run OPCCA workshops to funnel student money into Conservative causes, and take away funding from queer, womens, racialised and Aboriginal student groups at York a few years back.

One of the first websites to publish the 'Open Letter from the Left' that you signed Beisan was Take Back Your School, a right-wing blog with a subheadline that read: "Fighting back against leftist dominance on campus!" The subheadline has now been changed to: "The silent majority isn't so silent anymore." Which is pretty disturbing, considering the term 'silent majority' was coined by Anita Bryant in her America-wide campaign to repeal gay rights.

Your article was also strangely silent about the PGSS delegation-bit of a misnomer though, seeing as most of the delegation weren't PGSS affiliated. Or how about that the PGSS never passed the delegation of non-McGill, non-grad, non-Quebec students or the 'reform package' with their council? Anti-democratic? Clean up your own backyard first. If this reform movement is so popular and strong among students, I don't see why it was necessary to bypass the democratic structures at McGill and make decisions on behalf students about what 'reforms' they wanted.

What was the issue? Could PGSS not find enough of their own members to support their cause, so instead they just brought in some tiny Tories from Ottawa and Victoria (on student dime, mind you) to push for the 'reform' that McGill students were neither aware of, nor overwhelmingly seemed to support?

At the end of the day, you're only giving strength to the campus right. And if you think if their derailment is successful, that theres going to be a place for you in the 'new' student movement, you're dreaming. Once your usefulness has been exhausted, they'll leave you in the dirt.

Get real.

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Submitted by JimmyDouglass on December 1, 2009 - 12:07pm.

Oh and Ashley, the only voices that have been silenced are the voices of the students at Kwantlan who voted to continue working with the Canadian Federation of Students.

You should do what your students democratically mandated you to do instead of trying to sabotage the organisation they voted to be members of...again.

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What is right wing is your associaiton with Dean Tester et al. and your desire to destroy the work of strong activists across the country. People from Quebec are showing up on campuses in Ontario forcing activists to fight an attack on their union instead of working on the Anti-Poverty campaign the Federation is running this year.

That's what qualifies you as right wing.

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Now that breakfast's been served...

"Several of the motions would have removed decision-making powers from elected representatives and placed them in boards selected by lottery." Checks and balances are the backbone of democracies so that they don't turn into a tyranny of the majority. Also, the lottery would avoid the cognitive dissonance of having elected officials being monitored by elected officials elected at the same time...

How on earth does this qualify as right-wing? Are we just using right-wing to describe things we dislike and left-wing to describe things we like? Pretty funny. I left wing ice cream and kittens. I right wing aggression and okra.

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I am so tired of the argument that all reformers are Conservative for one main reason:

Even if we were all Conservatives, the fact would remain that we don't feel our voice is getting heard. Conservative students deserve proper representation just as much as anyone else. Furthermore, we have tried time and time again to create change from within and every time it has been shot down without a second thought.

Our voices have remained unheard through a very undemocratic system that pretends to follow all the rules. Whether we are Conservative, Liberal, Green, Bloc, unaligned or fringe-aligned, it does not change the fact that we have been left in the cold. And instead of figuring out WHY many of us walked out of closing plenary we have been criticized. Someone should maybe look into that.

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It was 'inappropriate' to spring a legal document on students under a situation of of duress "sign or you can't come in." There had been plenty of opportunities in the month beforehand for CFS to address the issue, they chose not to. Especially hypocritical from an organization that advocates for students' rights (ie not signing them away at moment's notice).

Are you going to keep on with the Cons argument? Even if we all were conservatives a) that in no way justifies the behaviour levelled against us and b) it does not affect the content of the reforms proposed.

Now excuse me, Steve and the kids are waking up and their eggs need to be scrambled.

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