

# STUDENT SPEECH AT UNB IN THE EARLY 1980s

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The modern university is an institution which is supposed to provide an open forum for learning and understanding. Today it has become a production line turning out a very specific type of "employable" graduate. The need to service the technical requirements of industry has reached a point where some students not only arrive at university unable to read or write – they graduate in the same state. What was to be an introduction to the universe of ideas has become a specialization in a narrow field of practical endeavor. As a result, the university ends up churning out malleable workers who conform automatically to society's rules because they know nothing else.

The mission which the university performs is one assigned to it by the leaders of our society. That mission requires that administrators maintain unchallenged power to direct the way in which the university operates. Because freedom of speech might create conditions that which would destabilize that power, expression on campus must be restricted to those forms of speech which have few power implications. Discussions of an academic or esoteric nature are not only unrestricted, they go on almost unnoticed. On the other hand, any exercise of free speech which questions social mores, destabilizes existing authority or has a direct local impact is monitored closely and, whenever necessary, suppressed. The power-related ramifications of self-expression are therefore the determining factor in whether something can be said freely at a university.

I approach this subject from a student perspective, by tracing events I witnessed at the University of New Brunswick during the period of my own politicization, preparatory to my three terms as UNB Student Union president. I will try to explain the power relationships on which various university structures are based, thereby revealing aspects of the university which could not survive were they to become the target of critical free speech. By describing some of my own experiences and those of other students who spoke out while I was at UNB, I suggest why freedom of speech is suppressed at universities and why such restrictions are to be expected from the society in which we live.

My father was an exile from dictatorship in eastern Europe and as a political science professor he taught me the value of freedom. My mother, who was also a teacher, encouraged my natural curiosity and imagination and set an example for me through her opposition to the restraints our society places on women. My parents taught me to cherish freedom of speech as a means of questioning injustice in the world around us. In high school I was a top orator and a prime minister in model parliament, but because everything we debated was imaginary

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or theoretical, there were few restrictions as to what we could discuss. My first brush with political reality came when, as vice-president of the Fredericton High School Students' Representative Council, I tried to apply what I had been taught about "parliament's control of the purse-strings" to the student government. I was one of a group of student leaders who asked that the students be allowed to decide how student council fees would be spent. The principal's veto of our demands and his censorship of the student newspaper led to a mass resignation by executives of student organizations.

The strict rules enforced in high schools are important to any study of freedom in the university because of the formative effect which those rules have on students' behaviour. In my case, the events of my high school years led me to resolve to stay out of things political, and I enrolled in UNB's Faculty of Engineering in 1978.

The UNB campus was generally quiet until September 1980, when newly-installed University President James Downey authorized police to evict the president of Jones House for holding two unauthorized entertainment events. I was stunned by the use of force and voted for the evicted student, Kevin Ratcliff, when he ran successfully for Students' Representative Council (SRC) president soon afterward. Ratcliff campaigned against the arbitrary way in which the university dealt with students.

Ratcliff was an honest man who had been wronged, but he lacked the experience needed to win a battle to improve the university. For that he could not be blamed. Student leaders were transitory, seldom in office long enough to realize how the university worked. Within the SRC itself, all important matters were referred to a professional non-student manager, who kept student leaders insulated from dealings with the university. Faculty advisors were present at student council meetings, and the Dean of Students was considered the chief students' spokesman on the campus. The role of student leaders was to keep quiet and consult privately with administrators.

Student life revolved around the residence system, even though residence students were in the minority. For years, they had dominated the SRC by voting as a block in elections. Residence student leaders represented some of the most conservative types on campus, often following their parents' footsteps in UNB's traditional old-boy network. When elected to campus-wide student leadership positions, such students found themselves in a symbiotic relationship with the university administration. They were supervised twenty-four hours a day: through their actions as student council leaders, in the classroom by their professors, and in their residences by administration-appointed student proctors and resident faculty dons. The predictable result was that the student council reflected the personal status of its leaders – it had no independence.

That structure had been perfected in the 1950s. Students tried to gain more freedom in the 1960s by incorporating the Students' Representative Council under the symbolic name of the UNB Student Union. That move was undermined in the 1970s, however, when a former student leader who had been co-opted by the university was hired as the Student Union lawyer. The student government's corporate identity was suppressed, the name "Student Union" went into disuse and the old high-school-style term "SRC" returned. Cooperation and compromise with the administration became the shibboleths of the day.

The key characteristic of that type of student government was not that it prohibited freedom of speech but that it made it appear unnecessary. Why would we speak out if the much more mature and knowledgeable Dean of Students could do so for us? Why would an SRC president complain publicly about a grievance when he could reach a compromise through a faculty advisor or residence house don? Why would a student council vote for a controversial motion if its faculty advisors, its lawyer and its professional manager disapproved?

The result was self-censorship. The student government elite restrained itself and developed an agenda that made more "radical" conduct seem out of place. By the 1980s, the student newspaper, the *Brunswickan*, had become the official voice for that kind of politics: "The main objective should be to shut off all sources of ridicule from the student population and to make business run more smoothly" was a typical editorial comment.<sup>1</sup> In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell described self-censorship as "the faculty of stopping short, as though by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought. It includes the power of not grasping analogies, of failing to perceive logical errors, of misunderstanding the simplest of arguments if they are inimical to [the ruling power], and of being bored or repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction."<sup>2</sup> Under such a system there is no problem with freedom of speech because no one has anything to say. I realize now that while there was little visible change in the university during SRC President Ratcliff's 1980-1981 term of office, his actions set the groundwork for what was to come. By standing up to the university, Ratcliff broke UNB's code of silence. He opened the undemocratic residence system to criticism; he identified how it served to control students. He brought the student government into the real world by eliminating its non-student manager so that elected student presidents would have to deal with the university face-to-face.

University students begin being reshaped from the day they arrive on campus. The students most accepting of their indoctrination are assigned to control the

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<sup>1</sup>Editorial, *The Brunswickan* (20 November 1981) 6.

<sup>2</sup>G. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Toronto: Reginald Saunders & Company Limited, 1949) at 213.

other students. This system is self-perpetuating and leaves the university appearing to have clean hands by pitting conservative students against progressives. The UNB administration used a policy of divide and rule in all of its dealings with students.

Most students arrive at university having been treated as children all their lives. Waiting to meet them at UNB were men like University President James Downey, who declared: "Not by our own wishes, but through the needs of such students, we remain in *loco parentis*."<sup>3</sup> The initiation of new students is purposely designed to permit a speedy transfer of control over docile students from parents to the university administration – before students can explore the relative freedom of adulthood. The assimilation of new students at UNB began with a freshman event called "Orientation Week". The event was directed by a student organization called the Orientation Committee that reported to the Dean of Students. Executive membership in the committee was the university administration's final test for obedient upperclassmen who wanted to move into leading roles in the SRC from positions of authority in the university residence system.

The administration had god-like authority for the students in the Orientation Committee. I remember committee members shouting to each other in advance of a speech by President Downey<sup>4</sup> to the freshmen class: "Dean Thompson said this! Dean Thompson said that! Dean Thompson told us we couldn't this! Dean Thompson told us not to forget that!", building up to a fever pitch with phrases like, "Dr. Downey will be here in twenty minutes!", and finally, "The president is here!"

Freshman were forced into wearing beanies, performing self-denigrating acts and joining in heavy drinking sessions – some for the first time in their lives. Whenever they were addressed by upperclassmen they would have to respond with the phrase "I'm a dumb freshman." Orientation was a cult. Freshmen would literally crawl on hands and knees, imitate animals, drink all night and awake to hazing at 5:00 am. For what? – Just to have a chance to join the following year's Orientation Committee that would do the same thing to the next freshman class.

Orientation Week played a vital role in shaping UNB students. Spending your first week in university being told how stupid, inferior, and powerless you are

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<sup>3</sup>J. Downey, "Letter to the Editor" *The [Fredericton] Daily Gleaner* (25 April 1986).

<sup>4</sup>Despite receiving a budget of tens of thousands of dollars from the SRC, the committee answered only to the UNB administration. In my first year as SRC president, the Orientation Committee chairman informed me that I had been barred from speaking to the freshmen out of a concern that I might make a critical comment that could embarrass the university. UNB security personnel were deployed around the Aitken Centre to ensure that I could not enter the building.

leaves a lasting imprint on many students. Such initiation rituals are the start of an education that creates a subservient human "product". If having a say over their own lives is forbidden, then any student exercise of freedom of speech with respect to the governance of the university becomes unthinkable: "They [administrators] do not propose to allow students to have any say over the conditions of faculty and administration work and life; the thought that students should regulate their academic pursuits, personal habits or political activities is bizarre on its face."<sup>5</sup>

The final result is inevitable. A graduate arrives in the "outside world" as a clean slate, ready to be written upon by the mass media. The mass media is in turn controlled by an elite which is proportionally even smaller than the one directing the university. Graduates know how to work but not how to think. They become a mere commodity which is bought, sold and traded by their employers. Suppressing free speech in the university is vital to maintaining the entire system.

It took a long time for me to see how things were run at UNB. But when classes resumed in September 1981, my computer science professor, Jerome Sabat, asked his students to defend the Memorial Hall Arts Centre from financial cutbacks. I broke my three-year-old resolution against participating in "politics" and wrote a letter to the *Brunswickan* to support Sabat. The arts funding issue became an embarrassment for the UNB administration. What I remember most about the affair was the combative way in which Sabat and his columnist wife Christina were taken to task in the *Brunswickan* by President Downey. Downey used terms like "utter and complete rubbish" to describe one of Sabat's complaints. The president's response led Mrs. Sabat to respond in a letter to the editor that "the UNB President holds no respect for public opinion, cannot tolerate policy criticism of his administration and is not above using tactics of confrontation and a hurling of self-indulgent personal insults and innuendos towards those who dare express concern about issues as serious as the one currently being raised, without having first consulted with Dr. Downey..."<sup>6</sup> It appeared that the main issue for Downey was not the Arts Centre controversy but the audacity which the Sabats had demonstrated in exercising freedom of speech.

That fall saw a number of debates about funding. In October, SRC President Ratcliff called on students to march to the legislature to oppose a massive tuition hike. It was the first student demonstration held since I had entered university, and I joined the many others who participated. By the time the march got to the legislature, the one megaphone had died. It was a disaster in the making. I moved to the front of the crowd to hear the speakers. SRC President Ratcliff

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<sup>5</sup>H. S. Becker, *The Struggle for Power on Campus* (Chicago: Chicago Aldine Co., 1970) at 9.

<sup>6</sup>C. Sabat, Letter to the Editor, *The Brunswickan* (16 October 1981) 7.

delivered a passive speech. A fellow student from the Faculty of Engineering gave a long discourse. When New Brunswick Minister of Education Charles Gallagher tried to speak, he was booed down by the few students who could hear him. There were more than a thousand students there, and without a megaphone, the demonstration was in limbo. I was furious and something inside me tugged at me to speak. I took the rostrum and with my full energy bellowed out a short speech expressing disapproval with the government and dismay with the failure by our organizers. The outburst earned me my first mention in the *Brunswickan*: "The final speaker was fourth-year student John Bosnitch who stood up and denounced all the other speeches."<sup>7</sup>

Soon after the demonstration, I heard about a plan to increase our SRC fees by 50 percent to renovate the Student Union Building (SUB). A referendum to raise fees was three weeks away, but it was the first time the plan had been publicized. The university administration, the SRC executive and the student media elites were all strongly in favour of a fee hike. I could not understand why students would demonstrate against increased tuition, only to have their own leaders join the university in trying to push through the biggest SRC fee increase in twenty years.

I formed a group called the Committee Against Unnecessary Student Expenditures (CAUSE) and submitted my name as a nominee for the Engineering Faculty representative in the SRC elections. To get a sense of how the student government operated, I attended a council meeting only to discover that the SRC was about to write off a \$2000 loan to a former SRC president who had served as Orientation committee chairman. When I spoke out against the plan, the council barred me from speaking. I realized that the SRC was just like the university in trying to stifle critical free speech.

I worked with the other members of the CAUSE committee to show fellow students the closed and undemocratic nature of our own government. The dozen or so members of CAUSE set up audiovisual displays in major campus buildings, placed posters in every hallway, handed out "Vote NO" buttons against the fee hike plan and sent cars with megaphones around the campus. No one had seen such a forceful student exercise of freedom of speech since the 1960s.

The administration wanted to expand the SUB so that university administrators like the Dean of Students could move their offices into the building. That would put the building under direct university control, doing away with the one last vestige of the radical 1960s – student management of the SUB. The student government did not care about that since they had never once defied the instructions of the faculty advisors on the SUB management board. For the

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<sup>7</sup>T. Lethbridge, News Section, *The Brunswickan* (2 October 1981) 3.

leaders of the student government, the newspaper and the radio station, the provision of a few more office spaces for their personal use was an acceptable trade for the student body losing control of the entire building. When CAUSE criticized their motives, the entire student leadership elite rallied into an alliance with the university administration to attack us.

Voting day was 21 October 1981. We in the CAUSE committee expected a victory for our "NO" campaign. However, when we went to the polls, we received a shock. The referendum ballot had been altered to favour the university-backed "YES" side. We discovered that University Secretary James Woodfield had printed the ballots and went directly to his office. Woodfield told us that the SUB management board chairman, a leading residence student, had submitted the ballot wording to University Vice President Finance and Administration James O'Sullivan, who in turn had been advised by University solicitor Gordon Petrie that the wording be changed. Woodfield had then gone ahead and printed a new ballot. The new wording would allow any funds raised to be used for unspecified renovations to be determined in the future. All reference to the unpopular renovation plans that had been the focus of the referendum campaign had been dropped. The student body would be writing out a blank cheque to the administration.

I asked who was to oversee the counting of the ballots. Woodfield said he would. I told Woodfield that his involvement was unacceptable and asked that the vote be annulled because the ballot had been altered. Woodfield said he would lock the ballots in his filing cabinet until a decision was made. I objected and asked that the ballot boxes be sealed with wax. Woodfield became angry and asked me whether I was questioning his honour. I said no, but that in light of the way the ballot had been altered and because several hundred thousand dollars were at stake it would be unacceptable for a non-student to hold the only key to the ballot boxes. Woodfield ordered me out of his office.

I spoke out publicly against Woodfield's conduct in the *Brunswickan*. Days later, I took my seat as a member of the student council and was successful in having the referendum vote annulled and a new vote scheduled. However, the next issue of the *Brunswickan* carried a letter from University Secretary Woodfield accusing me of "meddling with the vote counting process" and saying I "had the impertinence to question his integrity". He demanded an apology and called on the SRC president to bring my "behaviour" to the attention of the student council.

That incident in 1981 was the first in a long series of student disagreements with the UNB administration. At first, the administrators made clumsy responses because they had never before had to answer to anyone. They later refined their tactics.

With the new SUB fee-hike referendum vote several weeks away, the *Brunswickan* went on a counterattack against the "NO" campaign. It censored CAUSE submissions for containing "anarchist" views. It assigned a full front page to the SRC's non-student manager, who accused the CAUSE committee of deceiving the students. Editorial after editorial targeted our group. The incoming executives-elect of the SRC declared they would support the YES side in the new vote.<sup>8</sup>

The attack in the media was only the start. At my second SRC meeting I was served with a notice of impeachment for "dereliction of duty". Among the charges: injuring the good name of the organization, criticizing Secretary Woodfield, bringing up old issues, improper conduct outside a meeting, failing to bring all questions or accusations to SRC council before mentioning them publicly, going off campus – giving an interview to the CBC – about the SUB referendum, and not surprisingly, the old favourite, "stirring up shit and causing trouble". Translated into plain English, my offence was that I had exercised too much freedom of speech.

I realized it would be hard to fight the system, but I knew I was making an important personal choice between subservience and freedom. As the second referendum vote approached and a secret impeachment trial stood days away, I wrote a last letter to the editor of the *Brunswickan* that was buried at the back of the paper:

I am using this last opportunity to respond to... all those who wish to eliminate student opposition to unfair policies... everything possible (including impeachment) has been attempted to discredit the leaders of the NO campaign. Therefore... I challenge the... SUB Board representatives to defend themselves in a public debate... in the (SUB) Blue Lounge. I call for a full inquiry... into the improper handling of the last referendum vote. I waive my right to a closed "impeachment session" of the SRC, and hereby ask that the meeting be open to the public, recorded, and broadcast [as usual] over CHSR. I call for the support of any and all students to defend the right to freedom of speech on this campus.<sup>9</sup>

The CAUSE committee had discovered that the SUB management board had spent over \$6,000 of student money to campaign for a "YES" vote, mailing postcards to every UNB student. In response, we took up a collection and did

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<sup>8</sup>As usual, the new executive was dominated by members of the outgoing executive of the Orientation Committee. UNB was one of the very few universities where student elections were held in the fall and not in the spring. fall elections allowed Orientation Committee leaders to be propelled directly into office by freshmen voters who had only been on campus for six weeks and who knew nothing about the university except the names of the Orientation leaders. In 1986, I managed to move the general elections to the spring, about a month before the university locked out the Student Union government.

<sup>9</sup>J. Bosnitch, Letter to the Editor, *The Brunswickan* (13 November 1981) 21.



something which had never been done before: we printed our own newspaper. The *New Brunswickan* was devoted entirely to the SUB renovations fee referendum issue. Over a thousand copies of the eight-page tabloid hit the campus before the vote and decided the issue. Our "NO" side won a resounding victory.

The tide had turned. Next came my 25 November impeachment trial. I knew that the SRC planned to hold a secret closed meeting in which I could be summarily dismissed. I fought for an open meeting and the SRC gave in, but I was forced to sign a document entitled "Waiver" or face a return to closed session. On my signing, the doors were opened and the room was filled with a standing-room-only crowd of angry students who had come out to defend me. The council faltered and the impeachment was defeated.

My entry into the centre of student politics took place over just eight weeks. The tactics used by the university administration and its student supporters were to remain the same for the next six years, even after I left the university. Every possible form of pressure was used to suppress critical free speech. Lawyers and legal procedures were called in at the earliest sign of disagreement. University solicitor Gordon Petrie personally directed the administration and its student allies on how to handle even the most minor aspects of student government disputes. Any questioning of administrators was met with immediate demands for apologies and warnings of disciplinary action. Tens of thousands of dollars were used by the administration opposing student freedom of speech wherever it conflicted with the vested interests of the university. The money spent was later billed back to the student body in the form of higher fees agreed to by student leaders put in place by the administration.

I have outlined the events of fall 1981 in detail to show that there was no gradual buildup in this kind of activity over the years of conflict. Any affront, no matter how small, was met with an administration backlash from the very first day. Student leaders at UNB in the 1980s told the administrators many things they did not want to hear. We aired our criticisms in public because there had been no results when we spoke to administrators privately. As more students began to question UNB policies, the administration developed a siege mentality. The conflict culminated with University President Downey locking out the Student Union government and recognizing an obedient "student governing council" to replace it.<sup>10</sup> The final event that led to the lockout was the publication of what came to be known as the "Downey's Monkeys" poster, which criticized several students for selling out to the university in a battle over the student management of the Student Union Building.

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<sup>10</sup>*University of New Brunswick Student Union Inc. et al. v. Smith (S.) et al.; University of New Brunswick Student Union Inc. et al. v. Vaillancourt et al.* (1988) 88 N.B.R. (2d) 39.

University President James Downey decided that student freedom of speech had gone too far. I was refused the right to take courses at UNB and barred from the campus. Other students who spoke out after I was removed were suspended and threatened with expulsion. City police were called in to close down student polling stations. Elected student representatives were expelled from the UNB Board of Governors.<sup>11</sup> Students accused of supporting the locked out student government were barred from positions in student groups and removed from the student media. Supporters of the students' right to free speech were eliminated from the campus. Student politics at UNB entered a deep sleep.

The events of those years should be the subject of a book. The book should tell the story of the power of free speech and describe the lengths to which repressive authorities in one Canadian university went to silence criticism. Publication of that book should coincide with a rebirth of free expression at UNB and a growth of free speech at campuses across the country. The powerful technologies of the "Information Age" guarantee that the repressive university will lose its battle with open-minded students and professors. The only questions left to answer are: when will the reform come, and who will be the students and professors to successfully demand it.

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<sup>11</sup>*Forestell v. University of New Brunswick* (1988) 89 N.B.R. (2d) 1.