Notes from UTSU Board Meeting 24/04/14

The following motion was put to the floor, moved by Cameron Wathey (UTSU VP Internal-current/elect)

8. MOTION TO TAKE A POSITION ON THE STUDENT SOCIETIES SUMMIT REPORT

MOTION

Be it resolved that the UTSU condemns the Student Societies Summit report and recommendations.

The motion carried. Important parts of the debate are as follows:

(The titles in brackets reflect the positions of the individuals before the new UTSU board had its first meeting several hours later; i.e. they are former titles.)

Ms Yolen Bollo-Kamara (UTSU President­-elect, attended the SSS on behalf of the UTSU) stated that it had been a longstanding concern of the UTSU that the purpose of the summit was unclear. However, with the report, it seemed to her that the intended purpose for the university was to propose policy and exercise greater control over the affairs of the student societies.

Ms Bollo-Kamara was concerned by the recommendation of the report to create a body that could issue binding directives backed by the threat of fee withholding. She stated that this would create a situation in which student societies were compelled to act in a way that would conflict with their legal requirements (for the UTSU, the Canada Not for Profit Corporations Act or CNPCA), their current bylaws, and/or the will of the majority of their members. She expressed to the board that, as stewards of the corporation, it was their responsibility to make sure that the UTSU could comply with the CNPCA, the bylaws, and the will of the membership.

She explained that the fact that there was no information on how such a “student society court of appeals” would function or be membered was a concern.

Ms Bollo-Kamara was also concerned that the Office of the Vice-Provost Students (OVPS) would be the body responsible for determining the guidelines for student societies to operate in an open, fair, and democratic manner, as this could impact the way elections were run. She stated that it may impose blanket rules for issues such as running in slates in elections, which she felt was something that should be determined on a more local level. She stated that such guidelines would be better determined by members, and should fit with the bylaws and CNPCA. Lastly, she stated that the a student society court of appeals would be more powerful body than a general meeting of the membership, which is in conflict with the CNPCA, and goes against the mandate of the UTSU to represent all students.

Mr. Cullen Brown (Board Member from St. Michael’s College) compared the UTSU to labour unions, saying that they were equivalent bodies, and that similar actions taken by the government against a labour union would be widely condemned. He stated that the UTSU’s autonomy from the university was essential for representing students.

Ms Susan Froom (APUS president, Governor-elect) stated that she, along with the UTSU, was concerned about the exclusion of SCSU, GSU, and APUS, as the report recommended changes that would have implications for all of these groups. She stated that although these groups were allowed to submit arguments for the consideration of the summit, she had been informed by participants that these submissions were not considered at meetings. She felt that it was procedurally unjust to not involve these groups in a process which had recommended changes to the way they would function.

The following points I believe were also made by Ms Froom, though I’m not completely certain.

It was stated that the university’s involvement in resolving problems (probably both in the sense of the summit and in the student society court of appeals) was improper and gave them undue influence in the affairs of student societies, given that their incentives and values often conflict with those of the student societies.

It was also stated that the university’s role in the collection of fees did not give it a responsibility to make sure the fees were well-spent, and a parallel to labour unions was drawn to illustrate this point. Labour unions’ fees are collected by the employer, but the employer has no responsibility or power to determine that the fees are spent in a proper manner.

I asked whether the board’s position on the report would remain standing after the new board of directors was sworn in. The chair stated that it would, unless the new board of directors decided to bring the item back to the floor at a later date.

Ms Sandra Hudson (UTSU executive director, and former UTSU president) stated that the university had displayed a history of attempting to hold greater sway over the affairs of student societies, especially after significant backlash from student societies over issues such as flat fees. She stated that after the UTSU’s work with other student societies campaigning against flat fees in 2010 caused significant public embarrassment for the university, including alumni refusing to continue donations, the University attempted to hold a similar summit. Student societies refused to participate in this summit, seeing it as an attempt to weaken their advocacy power.

The executive stated that they wished to address some of the issues that had motivated the summit in an alternative process involving other student societies.