



Report on the National General Meeting (NGM) of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS)

Prepared by: Anne Boucher, President
 Tyler Biswurm, Vice-President Operations
 Joshua Bowman, Social Sciences Director
 Yolanda Alfaro, Vice-President Student Life

Contents

Background.....2

Meeting Purpose and Structure3

Meeting Outcomes..... 5

Conclusions on the 2018 National General Meeting 6

Conclusions on the Canadian Federation of Students..... 8

Background

The Canadian Federation of Students (“[CFS](#)”) is an advocacy group that was designed to pool the financial and political resources of member student unions (“locals”) across Canada towards objectives of greater national and provincial influence. The CFS also offers member locals a limited suite of services aimed at providing cost-savings in various areas. The model of the CFS is not unique; examples of similarly structured organizations include: the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (“[CASA](#)”), the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (“[OUSA](#)”), and the Undergraduates of Canadian Research-Intensive Universities (“[UCRU](#)”). Additional information on the nature and work of the CFS may be found on [its website](#), and in articles published by [The Varsity](#).

The University of Toronto Students’ Union (“[UTSU](#)”) has been a member local (Local 98) of the CFS, and its provincial component, [CFS Ontario](#), since 2002. As part of its contractual obligations to the CFS, the UTSU charges its members \$8.05 per term. For comparison, the UTSU charges its members \$19.04 in fees designated for discretionary use in funding its own advocacy initiatives and service programs.

The CFS governs itself in a similar fashion to student unions. Just as the UTSU, the organization is incorporated under the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act (“[CNCA](#)”). As such, certain limited elements of its governance mirror the UTSU’s. This includes the organization of annual general meetings for the national component (“National General Meetings”, or “NGMs”), which typically take place in the late autumn; unlike the UTSU, the CFS national component additionally organizes semi-annual general meetings (“SNGMs”), which typically take place in June. The provincial components of the CFS also organize general meetings on an annual cycle.

The UTSU, as a member local of the CFS, participates regularly in the governance process of the organization. This participation comprises the dispatch of delegations to the CFS’s various general meetings, where the organization’s most important decisions are made. Most recently, a delegation was sent to the CFS national component’s NGM, which is widely recognized as the most important annual governance event of the organization. The mission tasked to this delegation was the same as in past: to advocate for the views and needs of the students belonging to the UTSU’s membership.

This report documents noteworthy developments in the meeting, and delivers key observations of the authors pertaining to the CFS.

Meeting Purpose and Structure

The core objective of the CFS National General Meeting (“NGM”) is to give member locals the opportunity to engage with and weigh in on the work of the CFS in the year preceding the meeting; and to direct the work of the organization in the months and years following the meeting. Delegates arrive with the purpose of setting the sights of the CFS on things that matter to their union’s members—to do and say things that are meaningful to students.

The NGM is opened and concluded with plenaries. These plenaries are the most important components of the meeting, as they receive, host debate on, and render final decisions on all motions brought to the floor of the NGM by member locals.

In the period between the opening and closing plenaries, delegates are invited to meetings of a variety of groups and sessions. Delegates are required to participate in these groups, but are permitted membership only according to those communities they identify as a member of. These groups fall into a set of categories laid out below.

Constituency Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Francophone Students’ Constituency • International Students’ Constituency Group • Part-time and Mature Students’ Constituency Group • Queer Students’ Constituency Group • Racialised Students’ Constituency Group • Students with Disabilities Constituency Group • Women’s Constituency Group
Caucuses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circle of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Students • National Graduate Caucus • Caucus of Large Institute Associations • Caucus of College and Institute Associations • Caucus of Small University Associations
Provincial/Regional Components
Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Quebec, Prince Edward Island, and Saskatchewan.
Standing Committees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget Committee • Campaigns and Government Relations Forum • Organisational and Services Development Committee • Policy Review and Development Committee

This representational system has been observed to produce participatory barriers for some delegates. Delegates are encouraged to run for election as representatives of the group in which they have chosen to participate. Only elected group representatives are

permitted to participate in the meetings of Standing Committees. This is crucial because all motions considered at the NGM pass through the Standing Committees before being voted upon in the closing plenary. In some cases, this governance pathway has excluded delegates otherwise hoping to participate.

Meeting Outcomes

This report identifies both positive and negative outcomes arising from deliberation at the CFS NGM. These were judged as such according to the authors' assessment of the viewpoints and needs of the UTSU's whole membership. In deciding, the authors asked themselves the following central question: Will our members truly benefit from the passage of this outcome?

Positive Outcomes

- **Public healthcare for international students.** A policy aimed at promoting advocacy for international students' access to public health insurance was passed.
- **Against the sterilization of Indigenous women.** A policy condemning the sterilization of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit women was passed.
- **Against anti-semitism.** The UTSU's delegation submitted a resolution as an emergency motion condemning the anti-semitic attacks that took place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on 27 October 2018, and calling for the expansion of an existing CFS campaign to include anti-semitism as a target issue. The resolution was passed unanimously.

Negative Outcomes

- **Problematic governance structure.** A resolution eliminating the Student Artists Constituency Group was passed. The Chair ruled one UTSU delegate's questions surrounding the dubious terms of membership for constituency groups and their exclusionary tendencies out of order.
- **Lacking focus on student-centred issues.** Multiple resolutions addressing issues largely unrelated to students were passed. Their subjects included: the treatment of Canadian prisoners and the "relationship between post-secondary institutions, prisoners, and correctional facilities"; the practice of solitary confinement in Canadian prisons; a lockout of aerospace workers in Newfoundland and Labrador; and backlash against journalist Nora Loreto's coverage of the Humboldt Broncos crash.
- **Overinvolvement in individual member locals.** A resolution, submitted as an emergency motion, was presented with the aim of establishing an "Emergency Fund for Unions, Student Groups, and Student Organizers". It was structured to "be used in moments that post-secondary institutions take actions against unions" and other student groups. A member of the UTSU's delegation raised concerns that the fund would give the CFS the tools and mandate to interfere with the upcoming student referendum at the University of Ottawa. Several amendments were considered on the floor. Most sought to eliminate the possibility of undue financial support, or to schedule the fund's establishment after the aforementioned referendum. The motion was finally referred to the CFS National Executive due to time constraints.

Conclusions on the 2018 National General Meeting

Meetings of the CFS have, for several years now, carried with them an aura of novelty for delegates of the UTSU and onlookers from its home campus. The organization has been a consistent source of controversy for stakeholders in our union. At the 2018 National General Meeting, from a delegation consisting of five individuals, only two persons brought prior meeting experience with them. The authors of this report travelled to Gatineau with open minds and a commitment to as much balance as could reasonably be installed in their respective outlooks. Based on their experiences there, they came away from the meeting with a host of troubling conclusions. The authors believe that some of these issues deserve emphasis here:

- (1) The CFS has a limited tolerance of alternative viewpoints and critique; and
- (2) The CFS exhibits partisanship in the rules and conduct of its meetings; and
- (3) The CFS does not deliver on the ambitions of its advocacy objectives.

(1) Intolerance. The CFS was observed to enforce a political agenda established by internal thought leaders in its governance process. This is not to say that the extent of intolerance was total; points of discussion and debate challenging this agenda were entertained at various stages throughout the meeting. However, both individuals and viewpoints seen as deviating too far from the brand of progressivism established by the CFS suffered adverse consequences. Certain members of the UTSU's delegation were prevented from speaking at the microphone after voicing critique in earlier discussions. Resolutions with contents construed as falling outside the "party line" were reliably failed on the floor. These practices evidence a flawed democratic process. The CFS has a limited tolerance of alternative viewpoints and critique.

(2) Partisanship. The CFS played favorites with people, ideas, and stakeholders. The representational structure of its meetings obstructs the participation of some delegates on the basis of factors including their race, gender, sexuality, and even their enrolment status. One member of the UTSU's delegation was forced to seek election in a significantly more competitive environment than had they been eligible for membership in a "constituency group".

Preferential treatment is afforded to assertions that agree with the organization's political views. The authors witnessed multiple instances where a speech on one side of the debate received enthusiastic applause, followed by silence for the subsequent, opposing speech. On other occasions, delegates were accompanied by bands of supporters at the microphone.

The CFS also exercises partiality in its treatment of member locals. Together with certain other locals in attendance, the UTSU seemed to run afoul of the deciding standard. Wherever the UTSU's delegates went, suspicion seemed to follow suit. Genuine contributions to discussion were interpreted as submitted in bad faith. One member of the UTSU's delegation saw their proposed amendments consistently opposed and failed in one of the standing committees. On some occasions, members of the UTSU's delegation were prevented from speaking—by the Chair, who would rule the subject matter out of order—and by other delegates, who would rush to end debate preemptively.

The CFS exhibits partisanship in the rules and conduct of its meetings.

(3) Ineffectiveness. The CFS employs ineffective strategies in pursuit of its advocacy objectives. At the NGM, the authors witnessed the key role that the governance process plays in setting these objectives, and in shaping the strategy around them. While some objectives articulated there were laudable for their progressivism and relevance to students, even these were hampered by the measures set out for achieving them. Resolutions were dominated by the piecemeal release of statements, dispatch of letters, and adoption of internal policies with no conceivable effect on the outside world. From the authors' perspective, these observations seemed to evidence and underscore concerns that have been raised with the advocacy work of the CFS in the past. The CFS does not deliver on the ambitions of its advocacy objectives.

Conclusions on the Canadian Federation of Students

It is worth evaluating how the work accomplished at the NGM either benefits or harms our members, or even further, whether the work of the organization really affects our members at all. Even among the meeting outcomes we've recognized as positive, it is apparent that many of them have little relevance to the student experience, let alone to the experience of students here at the St. George campus. The argument can always be made that what may not *directly* impact the student experience still has a bearing on us *indirectly*—whether that be through our families, the workplace, our future endeavours, or other avenues. However, when so many dire issues exist at the postsecondary level—a lack in public funding for our institutions, a lack in funding to address the mental health crisis, and others—it is worrying to see a lack of focus on the issues that matter most to students. While the CFS prides itself on its work addressing issues like these, their advocacy initiatives (such as the [United for Equity](#) campaign) have often been limited to the distribution of stickers and buttons. We have consistently witnessed the CFS undertake projects falling on the spectrum of performative rather than tangible action. Speaking generally, the “positive” outcomes of this NGM, along with the results the CFS achieves otherwise, seem of trivial relevance to our membership.

The CFS has followed a disturbing pattern of limiting engagement opportunities for member locals. We have seen delegates prevented from participating in standing committees—crucial decision-making bodies of the Federation—due to their incompatibility with the representational structure enforced at meetings. Stopgap solutions, like seeking participation through more loosely defined representational groups have been slowly dismantled. In removing the Student Artists Constituency Group this past meeting, the CFS has narrowed the diversity of participation even further. Even if we concede for a moment that a identity-based representational structure is a preferable governance method, there are already identifiable gaps: Where are the constituency groups for low-income students, or for student parents? One member of our delegation raised these points, but had their points ruled out of order. These concerns were raised by our delegates again in committee, but the associated amendment was also deemed out of order. An self-proclaimed member-driven organization should not limit opportunities for engagement in its member-driven spaces.

The unsettling presence of the Student Federation of the University of Ottawa (“SFUO”) throughout the NGM is also something that cannot be ignored. Resigned SFUO executives [recently involved in fraud allegations](#) could be seen in varying capacities throughout the NGM. They chaired constituency group meetings and, despite no longer representing SFUO members, were present as members of the CFS’ National Executive. When asked how the organization planned to account for the potential financial losses of losing the SFUO’s sizeable membership fees ([should the SFUO cease to exist](#)) by a delegate, the CFS Chairperson responded to the question by saying they’ve been in communication with SFUO on how they can support them in their fight against their university administration. A SFUO executive was then given the floor, asking the room for further support, and was met with applause. This exchange underscored a pattern of dodged questions and suppressed concerns at the NGM, eliciting doubts that were confirmed by the CFS’s later release of a statement in support of the SFUO.

Support for the student union became resoundingly clear to us then--and later, when the CFS [issued a statement](#) condemning the University of Ottawa administration for its treatment of the SFUO. Allowing delegates who are not students to participate is one thing. *Actively welcoming* and *engaging* non-student leaders accused of financial mismanagement, however, is another. There is no moral justification for the CFS to commit to supporting the SFUO. It paints the unfortunate picture of an organization with questionable morals and values. It is not the responsibility of the CFS to defend or support an

organisation that is under investigation for allegations of that nature. The fate of the SFUO should be left in the hands of the students of the University of Ottawa, not the CFS. We voiced our concerns, and found ourselves to be the only doing so. Other delegations were either supportive or silent throughout the NGM, including when SFUO members contended for election to the National Executive; including when the Chairperson expressed support; including when SFUO executives implored other locals for their support; and including when their thinly-veiled motion was brought and discussed on the floor. Instead of calling fouls where they saw them, the CFS and its circle of loyal member local backed a union that was faithful to the Federation. The CFS turned a blind eye to the SFUO, and in doing so, chose what was beneficial to itself over what was right for students.

These observations beg the question of whether or not our membership should be reevaluated. The question has surfaced often in recent years—with the discovery of a [secret CFS bank account](#), the rejection of a majority of motions from the [Reform Package](#), and the regular hostility directed at the UTSU's delegates. In every year since 2016, the hope of the UTSU has been to defederate from the organization (statements were released in [2016](#) and [2017](#)). However, efforts have often fallen short due to [an arduous defederation process](#) that must be initiated by students. In the meantime, we continue to be one of the largest contributors of funds to the organization, handing over nearly \$700,000 in fees annually. We are of the position that our membership in the CFS should be discontinued, but ultimately, that decision lies with our members.