

COMMENT

Sometimes confusing, maybe expensive - but better than the alternative

by Tom Walker

NUS ANNUAL conference is a very strange experience - a whole world of hackery with a language all its own. For days afterwards, you find yourself hallucinating about procedural motions, taking 'parts', and people 'dropping the guilotine' on you.

It's a subtle, balanced, complicated, and occasionally farcical system - but with 1,500 students in a room taking votes, it was always going to be.

Everyone agrees that NUS needs change. Everyone could see that huge numbers of first-time attendees were completely bewildered by the organisation, and few would defend booze-ups, pizzas and going on Blackpool's rollercoasters as good uses of student unions' money. The question is: what's the alternative?

I'll be honest with you: I was elected to the conference more as a student newspaper editor than as a student politician, but I voted against the new constitution and encouraged the rest of my delegation to do the same. Why? Because good constitutions don't come from people who try to paint all their critics as 'hard left extremists'.

Because any constitution whose purpose is to cut back democracy and explicitly to throw the leadership's opponents out of the union has to be opposed.

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The two-thirds majority needed for constitutional reform is there for a reason - it's to ensure that constitutional changes are wanted by more of the organisation than just a simple majority. Constitutions are not supposed to be easy to change, and reform is not supposed to be rushed through undemocratic 'emergency' conferences.

The leadership tainted the debate by insisting on their changes only and refusing compromise, and by making it all too clear that the reforms were aimed at getting rid of their main critics, the supposedly 'unrepresentative' left-wing factions.

But those who take an interest in student politics are always going to be over-represented in NUS: that's why I was sitting there voting on dull finance motions while most people had gone off to check into their hotels and grab some lunch. If your answer to that is to eliminate voting altogether, then you have a very big

problem.

Their reforms assumed that the centre ground of student opinion is a long way from where it actually is: that we want to see a calm union that sticks within the 'Westminster consensus' of the Big Three political parties in an effort to persuade MPs that we are rational discussion partners. But most students would never vote for Labour, the Tories or the Lib Dems!

If we make radical demands, we stand a chance of getting students on the ground motivated and salvaging something out of this fees mess. If we make narrow, 'realistic' demands that just try to make government policy a bit less bad and fail to engage the mass of students with their national union in any way, the government will feel free to ignore us, as it has every time in the past.

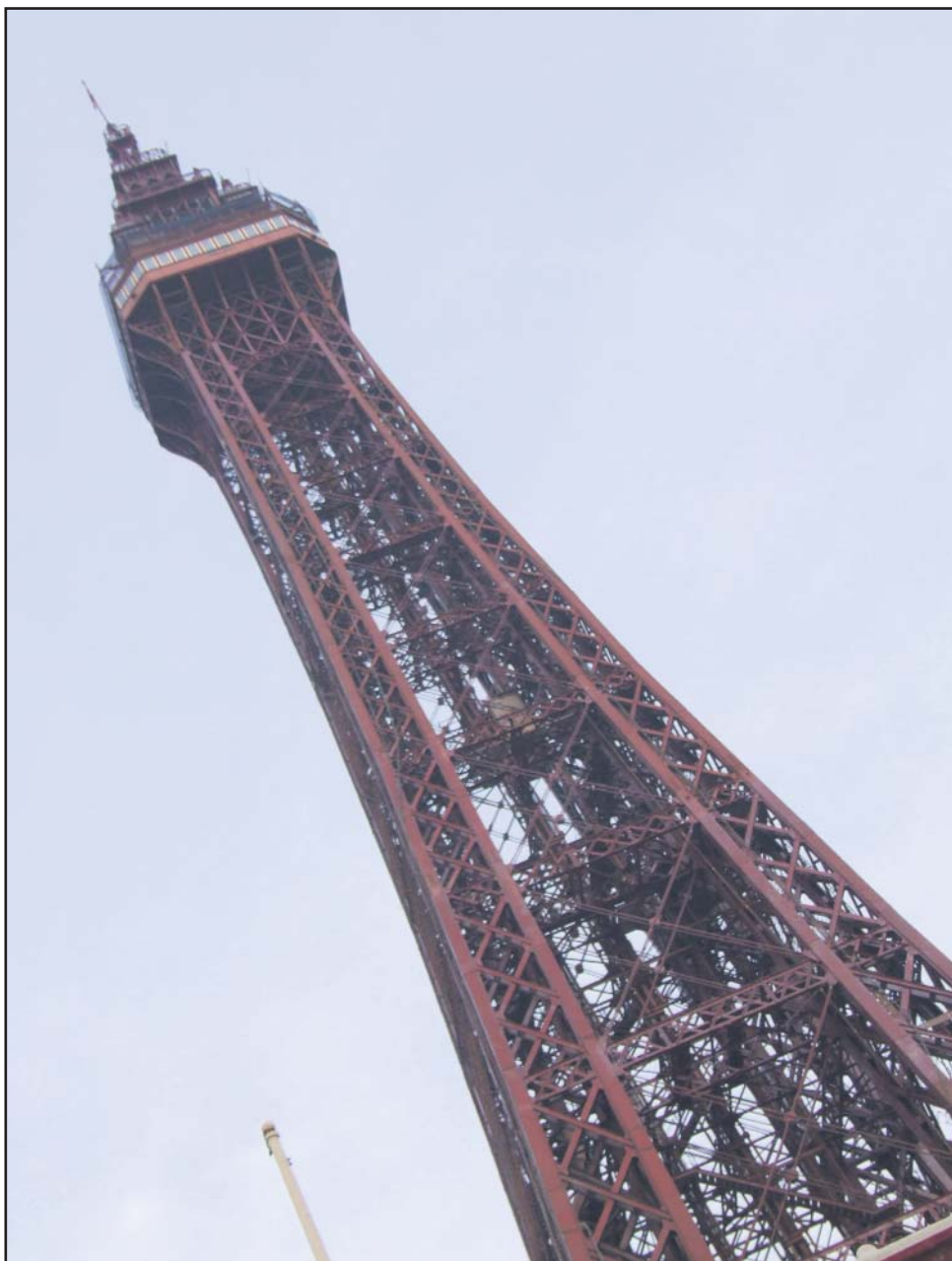
It is the existing leadership and staff - the ones who have had the power for years, who have made their union distant and irrelevant to students, and who have let it fall into terrible debt - that would have had all the power under this scheme. If we want change and reform, then handing more power to these people is surely getting things the wrong way round.

The new constitution would have seen the union run by non-student legal and financial 'experts', with students being 'consulted' on their views but not actually voting. That might have got the organisation out of debt and made it better at selling beer to union bars and such - but NUS should be about campaigning on the issues that matter to students, not about providing 'commercial services' and unpopular £10 discount cards to student unions.

If students somehow weren't 'responsible' or 'expert' enough to run their own national union... well, what a sorry reflection on us all that would be.

Why not, instead, make changes that would increase the space for democracy? Why not make the conference a few days longer, and bring back Winter Conference?

Why not fund the part-time officers properly to allow them to hold the leadership to account? Why not challenge the



NUS's yearly conference in Blackpool is an expensive and complicated event, but what is the alternative?

malign influence of the undemocratic 'senior management team' who pull the strings behind the scenes?

What is surely needed is not less student involvement in NUS, but more, much more. We must not allow the leadership to sell us out to this view that students are irresponsible, incapable and apathetic, because the thing that's putting students off NUS now is its all-around cliquey, bureaucratic uselessness, not the idea that it's 'too left-wing', 'too political' or 'too radical'.

Many important discussions fall off the agenda simply for lack of time because of procedural bickering - arguments that only get worse as the time for debate is squeezed further and interest groups try to push their motions up the agenda. Making conference longer would be a huge step on the way to restoring a prop-

er, working NUS democracy.

The leadership claims that having more time for votes would be 'too expensive' - but they'd have enough space to do it if they stopped wasting time on egocentric reports from vice-presidents and stopped wasting money on management consultants, opinion polls and general bureaucracy.

In fact, if they'd even turned up on time on the last day after their night out on the piss, it would've been a start. The debate isn't really about structures at all - it's about priorities.

What we have to remember is that annual conference brought together 1,500 students, elected to take part in a three-day festival of mass participatory democracy and shape the future of their national union. That, I think, is worth defending.

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