

‘Assessed Risk’ Asks Why

Con U Inc. Author David Bernans speaks with *The Link*

• **laura beeston**

Speaking at Concordia Nov. 18 about increasing tuition, corporatization and security on campus, David Bernans, author of *Con U Inc.* and *North of 9/11*, has championed anti-censorship and student space initiatives at Concordia since 2006, when he was banned by Concordia’s elusive “Risk Assessment Committee” from holding a book reading.

Heralded as a “political gadfly” by *The Gazette* for upsetting the administrative status quo in taking up Access to Information legislation demanding why he was censored and spied on during his time on campus, Bernans has been invited back as a guest speaker for the “Ask Why” campaign kicking off this week.

Bernans caught up with *The Link* for an interview about the changing role of the CSU and how students can—and should—mobilize to reclaim our campus.

The Link: In 2006, you said you were worried about the relationship between Concordia Students and Administration—what do you think of that relationship today?

I don’t really know what relationship the student union has with the administration right now. From what I see it seems quite similar to how it’s been in the past—students don’t have access to Concordia space when they want to use it to raise awareness about important issues that might cause offence to Concordia’s corporate partners.

Around 1999-2001 there was a brief flourishing of student activism that was able to take over a lot of space [on campus], but since then it’s been progressively closed off since 2002 to the present.

What made you write the book Con U Inc.?

I wrote *Con U Inc* during these years [because] I wanted to give a resource to people who were struggling at Concordia for student space, publically accessible education and an education that was more than something that’s just preparing them to be human resources in Corporate Canada.

A lot of activism at the time was centered around things like the food exclusivity contracts. Students couldn’t even have a wine and cheese event, or a bake sale with their own food, [because of these corporate contracts]. There was no People’s Potato on campus yet, because it would have been a violation of the exclusivity agreement to have something like that. [...]

We had a “cheese in” once, in the Hall Building. It was an illegal event where we gave away food, but we invited [the administration] to come and arrest us. Over cheese. You can imagine.

You’ve been invited to speak at a campaign encouraging students to inform themselves

about the changes we're seeing on our campus. What questions should students be demanding of the administration?

The most basic question is about access: why can't students use the space in a public institution that is supposedly there to encourage independent critical thought?

Why aren't we given space to promote and hold events, to question established truths, or [to be] critical of the relationships between ConU and the corporate powers that be?

Also, why won't Concordia release where it invests its own money—the millions of dollars in donations people make to the school is put in a private foundation [The Conrodia Foundation] that is shrouded in secrecy.

Why we don't have some kind of a body that looks at ethics of corporations that we do business with, be it research contracts or donation agreements? Why there's not a committee to look at the activities of those corporations to see if we really want to do business with them—it could be comprised of student and faculty representation or representation from the broader Con community. Why are their exclusivity agreements kept secret in a public institution?

Furthermore, why is our administration and Board of Governors dominated by corporate interests?

I think a lot of students feel powerless against the larger bodies at work. Do you have any ideas for students about the way forward today?

Part of the problem is the way that the student union has evolved over the years. The constitution is still pretty much the same as it was when I was working for the CSU, but the way that that constitution is applied has changed.

If you ask any student 'what's the highest body in their own student government?' they might say the CSU president, or executive, or council—nobody would say "the students." But in fact, when you look at the constitution, it is the students who are the highest body in the form of the general assembly.

I don't know the last time it was that the CSU held a general assembly, but it was much more common back in the day—to have direct assembly, direct democracy—this is how students are effectively mobilized.

The things is, students nowadays think when they are electing people to sit in an executive or council, they think they're voting for representatives to represent them to the administration, but that's not really an effective way of dealing with bureaucracy or making any kind of significant gains. The admin really couldn't care less what these student reps say on whatever committees they're on. I mean, they go through the motions, but then they just make decisions based on the bottom line. [...]

What was going on in the days of the CSU when I was there was the union took very seriously that it was an institution of direct democracy and it was the highest governing body of the general assembly, and we'd pull the general assembly to have things like the student strike, and create a bargaining committee. If the administration worked out an offer, the committee would take it back to the students, where we'd have had another assembly, and come to an agreement.

What the student leaders' job was not to represent student's interest in front of the

admin and say, “this is what students would like, can you please do it?” It was too mobilized.

[Students] have to elect leaders who are going to do more than represent them, but to actually encourage their mobilization.

Effective student leaders are the ones who get students organized and allow them to express what they want from their campus. [The CSU] then needs to take those demands to the administration with the students behind them, and say, “these are students interests, you can follow through on this or face the consequences.” [...] With this approach, the university will listen. They have to.

It’s exciting to see that things like Campus against Corporatizations—this grassroots movement came out of this frustration with the PepsiCo contract [in the days following the exclusivity agreement renewal at the end of October].

If students keep organizing and pushing for this, they have to listen. But students have to throw up student leaders who are going to do more than represent them, but to actually encourage their mobilization.

How did that work when you were a student?

Well, back in 1999, there was no Tim Hortons in the Hall Building. When we were mobilizing to inform students about the general assembly and [the eventual student strike], we had tables there distributing information—as this space is the busiest, best way to talk to students and the most effective way to tell them what’s going on. All of a sudden, security came down and said, “You can’t have tables here” and attempted to stop us from talking to students, so we called the student executives, who came down and sat at with us.

[The CSU] said to security at the time “okay, arrest us.” They basically told the administration, “look: you have two choices: let us do the mobilizing ourselves or you can do it for us. If you arrest us for tabling, students will mobilize around that. We’re going to mobilize one way or another, so the choice is yours. We’re going to mobilize one way or another.” That’s the kind of leadership that students should be looking to put in place today.

It’s not being a student leader just to represent students on a board somewhere—it’s about being an effective mobilizer, an effective activist for student space. I don’t know anything about the current CSU, but from what I’ve seen since 2003, there hasn’t been too much of that.

[...] Anyways, the end of the story is that there was an agreement of 18 months where the administration ceded the space to the CSU to table, and so people could organize and mobilize there. Eventually and because that mobilizing was so successful, the university didn’t like it and so when that agreement came to an end the university fought tooth and nail to not allow the tabling to continue, claiming it was a fire hazard.

A year later, they put up a Tim Hortons. Twelve months earlier it was a fire hazard to have tables there but now we have a Tim Hortson! They’ll say anything!

You can’t expect good faith bargaining from the administration, you can’t expect they are going to follow through on anything they say unless they’re legally obliged or you have the numbers to make them.

The renewal of the PepsiCo contract is a huge issue on campus today. Students felt very

left out of the agreements. Can you comment about this and how it was renewed?

I'm not at all surprised by the administration actions: going through the motions, "listening" to students, and then going right ahead with standard operating procedure and doing what they want.

If students don't have an effective mass of larger organizing network behind them that could somehow enforce their agenda, so it's tough.

The University can string you along, but they have the great advantage that they're there forever, but students are there for three or four years. I'm not at all surprised that they would do such a thing. It's not in the interest of the administration to do anything against corporate interests and trying to convince them otherwise is actually talking to the wrong audience.

University students tend to think that you go to school, learn how to make rational arguments and think that rational arguments matter, and that people who make the best arguments win.

But that's not how it works. Unfortunately, you can make the most rational arguments in the world—about how Pepsi is bad for health, how water is an important resource that everyone should have access to, and how we should be helping our local economies and source locally—but you're not going to win over the people who really are making the decisions because they're making decisions, not on the best argument, but based on the bottom line.

I'm not saying rational arguments don't matter, but you have to be mindful of where and who you expect to convince with those arguments. You can convince students and mobilize students, but it won't convince the powers that be. They're aware of these arguments, they just don't care.

One of the powers that be you speak of is your old friend, Michael Di Grappa [Former VP Services who signed the PepsiCo agreement on his last day in office].

I read an excellent quote you wrote: "Di Grappa and I are two different species living in the same university ecosystem but in fundamental opposition—the administrator and the writer. [...] Mr. Di Grappa has an iron hand in dealing with Concordia's unions while I am a campus union organizer. Mr. Di Grappa wears the finest Italian suits. I do not own a tie. Mr. Di Grappa chairs the Risk Assessment Committee. I am a risk to be assessed."

What do you think of his role in the PepsiCo Contract renewal?

It's really unfortunate that Michael Di Grappa is leaving. I was hoping, as students start to wake up and look at issues like security at Concordia and how to take back the university, that they'd realize we need to throw light on all the secret security stuff going on. Di Grappa is the only known member of the risk assessment committee, the committee that authorized my censorship on campus.

I've always encouraged the Board of Governors to put forward a motion calling for Di Grappa to tell the university who was on the Risk Assessment Committee, past and present members and to give detailed accounts to all its decisions. All of this has taken place in secret.

The fact that they have a RAC without any kind of paper trail is also disturbing—

the one committee that has the power to shut down critical discussion doesn't leave any minutes!

The university says there are none, and left absolutely no paper trail. The Access to Information request I made only applies to documents; you can't call someone to testify when they don't have any minutes. So it's really unfortunate that Di Grappa is leaving now, because maybe we'll never know what happened if he doesn't serve Concordia any longer.

You've been called a "great supporter of Concordia, but also a security risk." You have evidence that you were spied on by the administration over the North of 9/11 book launch, by the RAC who chooses who is allowed to speak on campus and who can book rooms, and whatever else.

Do you think organizations the administration might see as "subversive" student groups should be worried about not knowing the extent of the security apparatus on campus? What can you tell me about the security at Concordia and their policies on public space?

First, it's scandalous that the university would be spying on it's own students. I mean—that's not the role of the university. The University had to be reminded by the commissioner of the Access to information of this. They didn't want to give out this information about them spying on me, but in his ruling, the commissioner said, "well, you are an educational institution, not a police organization, you can't use arguments about revealing your investigation techniques and so on, that's not what you're supposed to be doing!"

It's really troubling that an educational institution would be spying on people who would be organizing events and raising awareness on issues. That's what a university is supposed to be doing—its and educational activity!

What it comes down to is that we don't know what the security apparatus is doing. From what I've seen in documents, it does look like thankfully they are fairly incompetent. [Laughs] It doesn't really seem like they have a very good handle on what's going on.

But that's beside the point.

No one's being tortured or anything, but we should be allowed to organize and mobilize on campus and to do public readings of a fictional novel on campus without anyone spying on us. There should be freedom on campus.

Is there anything you'd like students to know about our university space before you speak tomorrow—security risk assessment pending?

Hopefully I'm not a risk this time [laughs]. But honestly, my advice is to take it. Take the space. I mean that quite literally. That's how student space was won in the past. We used to just poster everywhere, it was like wallpaper, [...] we used to culture jam the Zoom media ads in the bathrooms. The reason students don't have [space] anymore is because they didn't fight to keep it. Fight for it.

It's really not about waiting for the CSU to do it for you. There has to be some kind of organization at the grassroots level that gets things going and eventually, hopefully, the CSU will follow and realize their role is not to represent students to the administration but to mobilize and to reinvigorate the institution of direct democracy.

If you want, you can hold a general assembly through petition. Do it. [...] The CSU is like the administration in this way—they will move if you have the numbers behind you.

Listen, this has been so valuable. I think you're an important link between where we came from as students demanding space and where we're going. It's cool to hear about the power that we did have and can have again, with examples of success stories that happened in your time that can possibly happen in our time.

Exactly. I don't see why not. I think that when student realize they can have the space they'll want it. They just have to realize it's possible. Why don't you just take the Hall building back? It'd be a lot cheaper than a new student centre.

<<Catch David Bernans speak on the 7th floor of the Hall Building on Wednesday, Nov. 17 from 5-8 p.m. >>