

Talking with Presidents

The Full Transcript

• **laura beeston**

Concordia University's Interim President Frederick Lowy:

The Link: Can I get your impressions of the Board of Governors meeting [that took place on Sept. 28]? What was your reaction to the motions that were carried through and what did you think of the student reaction?

Frederick Lowy: I think there were two meetings at the same time. One was the issue of student representation on that Board, which took precedence in the newspaper and no doubt on the minds of most students. I don't find any fault with that; if I were a student I'd be more interested in student affairs than anything else.

But the main meeting was the tremendous move forward that we've made since last winter, and we had a university in turmoil. Since then we've done whatever possible to get communication going among the various segments of the university and I hope we've succeeded.

The main governing bodies, the Board, the Senate and students were talking to each other, and meeting with each other and are trying to solve problems. The fact that we were able to get this far—with the Board and the Senate coming together to agree on the bylaw changes is a remarkable step forward for the university.

I realize that the question of representation of students is the forefront in students' minds and I understand that, however I do think that, although the students have a point, they at least didn't mention in their talk yesterday nor in the newspaper interviews that the Board has really gone a fair way to alleviate their sense of disempowerment.

In point of fact, with the addition of an alternate, both undergrad and grad students have the capacity to speak as they wish at Board meetings and two of the three have the capacity to vote.

I should also point out that it's rare—in my previous ten years at this university, I don't recall a single instance—that the vote was so close that one [vote] would have made a difference.

I know it's a symbolic thing rather than a practical thing, but in real terms the students have essentially three voices on the Board and not one. That is, two undergraduates and one graduate.

While this is a reduction—mind you a very small reduction—if you do the math, if you count the alternate student on the Board, essentially you're moving from 12.5 to 12 per cent representation.

In meaningful terms, students will be represented. Every other constituency has also taken a hit because we are convinced that the External Governance Review Committee report got it right in going down from 42 to 25.

And, indeed, the government's bill [Editor's note: Lowy is referring to Bill 38, a piece of provincial legislation introduced in 2009 that would have regulated the size of the Board's for Quebec's universities that was heavily criticized by the schools and was

never voted into law] will legislate that it goes down to 25.

This makes the Board more manageable in the sense that people will become more engaged.

In the previous Board, so many Board members did not really participate in discussions, unless [in] the executive committee, which is something people in the end didn't want. A way to nix that is to have a Board where people really have a chance to talk.

Getting the Board down to 25 [was important] for us, and [students should be] recognizing that all the constituencies involved will be under-represented compared to before.

Some, for example the pensioners, feel that they have no representation at all. But they have other ways to make their voices known. I feel that the university is really moving forward.

Look, there is a lot of concern about the Board chairman. But he's going to step down at the end of this academic year. The Board chairman has also stepped down as Chair of the presidential search committee.

Jacques Maynard is going to be doing a very good job—he is a person who will give good leadership to that committee. I think that committee will have a pretty good chance at coming up with a candidate who will move the university forward.

Apart from the fact that we have unhappy students, I think that the university is better off than we were before at that meeting. Same thing will happen at the senate next week.

So, you've said before that holding multi-stakeholder meetings at the administrative level is a tremendous step forward for Concordia.

Now, I'm wondering how the university is going to continue to ensure that transparency is a central tenet of these meetings. I think people are curious, so how are we going to keep these meetings open moving forward?

Transparency essentially is everybody's business. Members of the Board received in the mail the details [about the Board meeting and they] were by-and-large not discussed at the Board itself, but everyone had a chance to read it.

What was discussed were the contentious items, and the only really contentious one was the student representation. The others had been discussed and there was agreement on them.

But I agree with you, [transparency is] extremely important and it's an ongoing fight. You're speaking to the converted, personally and for the university.

As for other open forums, I'm not on the [presidential search] committee, but the committee is at work, accepting nominations and applications from anybody. By the way students are encouraged very much, if they have ideas on the subject, to chime in and let us know what they recommend.

Everybody's talking about Bill 38 and absolute numbers [for Board makeup], but that bill was hugely contentious when it came out in 2009, with 18 university bodies across Quebec coming out against it. It got a huge backlash no one [in the provincial government] expected and it was tabled. How likely is it that it's going to come back?

It depends on how firm the government is on this issue. I know that Concordia was unhappy at the time, but I have no idea whether or not the government intends to bring it back.

[Either way], we have to keep in mind that Bill 38 might come back, and be guided by aspects of the Bill that we think make sense. And we do think that the 25-[person] limit, that is a maximum for our Board, does make sense in its own right.

Okay, so my next question is something I'm sorry to bring up, because it's almost become a cliché by now, but it has to do with this phrase called the 'culture of contempt,' that's going around campus.

Especially at the Board level, there have been very public efforts to try to move from a culture of contempt to a culture of respect, but a lot of students left the meeting yesterday feeling that the culture of contempt was alive and well at Concordia, especially in the way that the Board dealt with students.

There was also a phrase made that maybe Board meetings shouldn't have an audience—that was result of a student being very vocal. I'm just wondering what you think of that, and the reaction of students to this 'culture' at Concordia.

I don't agree. Of course it may come across that way, but certainly no contempt is intended and I hope it doesn't actually exist. Whether it's there or not is in the eyes of the beholder.

I don't think that there was an attempt to be contemptuous or dismissive of students. It is true that the Board chair ran the meeting in a fairly strict way, but he has a right to do that.

I don't think anybody on the Board believes [that] people [who] want to sit in on Board meeting should be excluded. I'm perfectly content for people to come, depending on the availability of seats. I have no problem with an audience being there to see what's going on.

Okay, moving away from the Board meeting for a moment, I wanted to ask you about the CBC Daybreak interview you did on Sept. 13. You said you really empathize with students about rising tuition fees, but your position is that they do need to go up.

This is a two-part question: First of all I was wondering if you heard about the demonstration in the Hall Building—

I'm afraid I wasn't aware of it.

Oh, it was basically a demonstration against tuition increases that involved balloons...

Oh yes, I heard of it, but I wasn't there. But someone did mention balloons.

Well, these demos are set to intensify over the year. Can you clarify your position on the tuition increase with The Link? And what is the position of the university if the demonstrations intensify?

Let me just clearly state that I think that students have a right to demonstrate, as long as they do it peacefully, don't cause damage to property or harm to people and if students are respectful of those students who don't want to demonstrate.

Otherwise I think that students or anyone else in a free country has a right to demonstrate and be heard.

As far as the increases themselves, look: if money were available that we needed from other sources, no increases would be justified. No one thinks that tuition increases are a good thing.

Though I recognize that some people will have no problem with the increase, I know that others will and that's unfortunate. As a matter of fact, we're putting more money into student support this year, and so is the government.

I do believe that in addition to merit-based scholarships we need need-based scholarships and we certainly have to do whatever we can to help those students who can't make it easily.

However, the universities can't continue in a competitive environment without adequate funding.

There's a huge gap in funding available to Quebec universities as compared to universities elsewhere on the continent, which hits us in a variety of ways—[like] when departments compete for new professors, when existing profs and staff are lured away by higher salaries elsewhere, etc.

But, of course, Montreal is a great place, which really helps us. It's good to work here even if you're not making the same money, and it's a nice place to live. The standards of living are also lower than some other cities. But when the income differential is too large, then we're in trouble—and that's happening.

Of course we're after the government to increase the share from the provincial budget, but the answer is that there is no more money. So it's a fight we [at the university] have to continue.

There has to be greater sources of revenue to universities than there are now in Quebec, and therefore I think the increases—namely the students doing their part—is part of the picture, as long as the increases are balanced by increases in student aid for those who need the help.

Any last words for the students? Anything you'd like to let them know about?

How many hours have we got? [Laughs] Look, there are a lot of things I'd like to say to students. To begin with, today I just answered your questions, but let's sit down at some point and I can give you my broader vision for the whole university.

Look, we're all partners in this, we sometimes disagree, but it's *our* university. It's your university, and it's my university. Let's face it, presidents come and go, students come and go but the institution lives on. It's about the welfare of this institution.

Dr. Lowy said he would be very pleased to sit down with The Link and would absolutely follow up with a one-on-one throughout the course of the year.

Concordia Student Union President Lex Gill

The Link: *I'd like to get your impression of the BoG meeting last week.*

Lex Gill: Look, it's not that it the behaviour from the Board was unexpected, but what it did was solidify a lot of our fears and concerns about university governance.

You know, the problem fundamentally is what happened at the Board, from my perspective at least, disregarding the mandate that Senate set forward. The parity committee, on which I sat, is, in my impression, illegitimate. I don't think the Board had the mandate to move forward on these changes and the fact that they did was sort of, in one sense, was impunity and indicative of a bigger problem.

You can change your bylaws all you want, but you're replicating the same dynamics of power, marginalization and authority that got them into this governance crisis in the first place. Fundamentally nothing has changed: same tactics, same people.

Do you think that the culture of contempt is alive and well at Concordia?

Yes; absolutely—and specifically, contempt for students.

I think—and I hate to play the linking-issues game, but—it's the same thing with the student centre, the Board of Governors or tuition: the university only wants you sitting at the table when it's convenient. And they're just as happy to kick you off.

This is the only body that really has the ability to make such sweeping decisions about your student life at the university, about your fees, about research. The decisions made at the Board level fundamentally and directly impact student's lives and these are the same people who are telling students they don't want them sitting at the table.

Yes, contempt is a good word for it.

I just fail to understand, the sort of decrease in undergrad representation, and specifically the way it was handled—the secret ballot, the procedural nonsense, the “I'm the chair” [attitude from Board Chair Peter Kruyt] and the “We can talk about democracy later” [statement from Executive Board Member Rita de Santis]—all these sorts of things really tarnishes whatever attempt Concordia was making to [fix the culture of contempt] and their [desire] to move forward.

My next questions are about the major players at the Board meeting. What do you think of how Alex Matak and Peter Kruyt handled themselves? Something very serious came out of their exchange, and it was that comment that “maybe [the Board] shouldn't have an audience.”

I think it's bigger than that. You know, I have an irregular amount of privilege compared to most students; I get to sit, speak and vote at these meetings. I get invited to lunch with these corporate hacks, so I don't think it's appropriate for me to judge Alex's behaviour because I have that privilege and would be very wary [to comment on hers].

However, I think that her reaction was maybe naïve—insofar as standing up and heckling these guys is not going to get you anywhere politically—but that frustration and anger and disappointment is legitimate.

It's human and it's honest and that's more than you can say about many on the Board right now. I think that what I tried to bring up on the Board before they cut me off was that Alex's outburst and feelings of students in the audience [is not going away].

If you cut people out, silence them and marginalize them, well, people find a way to speak. Whether or not she's got a microphone, she's going to be there. You can drag her out of the meeting, I guess, but what function does that serve?

People will find a way to speak; it's a question of—do you want it to be in the spirit of cooperation, or [do you want to] beef up your security budget for these meetings?

How do you think the Chair handled the meeting?

Well Peter Kruyt is a man that just does whatever he wants, isn't he? It's not unexpected, but I think he did throw us a bit of a bone insofar as he could have just procedurally stopped us from talking about undergraduate representation at all.

It's not like these people function under Robert's Rules [of Order]; it's sort of the dictatorial whims of Peter Kruyt and company. But he could have just not have that debate at all. In a way, I'm sure he thought he was facilitating democracy in some way.

I can't really figure out what's going on in these people's heads, to be honest with you. But I think it's fair to say that Peter Kruyt probably thinks he's doing the right thing—they all do—they all think they're "volunteers."

I was pretty astounded with the lack of respect he treated the students in the audience with. I was really unnerved with the way he handled procedural attempts on our parts to discuss this motion, to debate it, to have a separate vote on it. I thought that was really heavy-handed.

In the end, you can be collegial and respectful with these people, but any students who think these people on the Board are on their side is fooling themselves.

So, if the decision at the Board was expected and anticipated, were you talking to these people before the meeting? Were you trying to convince them to change their minds?

Absolutely. The problem is exactly what Lowy keeps saying: "We're very sympathetic to the students." But, Goddamn it, we don't want your sympathy—we want a vote.

The problem is also that people who are normally allies couldn't be asked to [be]; the part-time faculty couldn't say anything because they went [from having no votes to one vote] and the full-time faculty explicitly won out [as their representation went up]—and I don't want to specifically comment on that, but take what you want from it.

Even if we did have the support of the entire internal committee, the structure of the Board is such that the external members control what goes on. So I don't really know what to say on that one. They made up their minds.

People were using Bill 38 and the External Governance Report as an excuse not to have a conscience. They were saying, "We actually agree with you, we think the students should have that seat, but we have this piece of paper that says otherwise." They should have been thinking for themselves.

Anyways, I'm starting to rant. You know what I mean.

After the Board meeting there was direct action in the Hall Building. Do you foresee more to come?

The activist in me wouldn't call the balloon thing direct action, but yes, it is action. The bigger answer is absolutely—[expect action] from the CSU, from student groups who are angry and frustrated and want to express themselves and from the community.

When you're closing people out of Board rooms, when you're closing people out of classrooms, fine: we'll meet you on the fucking street.

I think that there is a sense that people aren't being listened to, understood and cared about, and the natural way to react, I think on some level, is disruptive—and then obviously you couple it with research and information and engagement and you try everything you possibly can procedurally to make these things happen in a legitimate way.

Nobody in the student movement is ruling out direct action, occupation and strikes, but it's because negotiations just haven't worked so far. It's not a question of, "No, we're not going to negotiate, let's have a riot," it's a question of, if you've tried everything and you have no other options.

Also, good direct action is playful and creative, and I would urge people who are working on those sorts of things to keep that in mind.

This is sort of a side note, and I didn't ask Lowy about this, obviously, but tell me about the Mob Squad?

The Mob Squad is a big deal. We're starting major recruitment this week, posters are going up, and every Friday on the 7th floor lounge there will be informal horizontal meetings for people who want to be involved in actions around tuition specifically.

I'm really excited about it. Everyone is welcome. There's a ton of fresh blood. There's a sense of movement on campus that I haven't seen in a long time.

Any comments or questions for the next tête-à-tête with the presidents? Email editor@thelinknewspaper.ca