

INTERVIEW WITH THE NUSAS PRESIDENT, NEVILLE CURTIS - THE NEW NUSAS.

"Controversial, much plagued and at times chaotic the 1970 NUSAS Congress has nevertheless been described as successful by many of those in attendance.

New constitution.. new policy.. new Executive.. new commitment to action and programs; less formal debate; no walkouts; new black white relationships, vast expansion in office bearers, programs, finance and effectiveness; less bickering and futile debate, and more constructive co-operation, planning and organisation for the 1970's. These might describe what turned out to be the most tumultuous Congress in the last decade.

As yet no formal statement or unified document has emerged setting out what the new NUSAS is, or will do, but there is something new stirring; NUSAS instead of dying or resisting change, as so many predicted it might, has in fact emerged with new energy, new dynamism and new determination."

Generalities? Indeed they are, so Varsity went in search of the newly re-elected NUSAS President Neville Curtis to fill in the details to the statements he makes above:

Varsity: What was different about the 1970 Congress?
Curtis: It was shorter, and devoted to work not debate. Five years ago Congress took 150 resolutions. This year we took only 50. Instead we planned in detail the projects, campaigns and conferences which will occupy the NUSAS of the 70's. We redrafted the constitution entirely, restructured the organisation from National Executive down to Local Committee; spent hours examining finance and fundraising, and emerged at the end with a total picture which the new Executive, new local committees and new SRC's will translate into action in the course of the next twelve months.

Varsity: One is then tempted to ask what was the same about the 1970 Congress?
Curtis: The productive chaos. The basic format of Assembly sessions and Commissions. The problems facing students. The hostile attention of certain 'gentlemen'. The parties. The retention of open membership belief in the principle of non-racialism. The good relationships between English, Afrikaans, white and black, Indian and African students representatives of all of whom were present.

Varsity: Would you outline what the 'new' NUSAS is all about?
Curtis: Yes and you can take the new out of quotation marks. We have changed almost every aspect of NUSAS except some of the fundamentals such as open membership, pulled the whole thing apart, and put it together again to constitute an organisation which in operation is going to be radically different from the tired old NUSAS.

To start with the constitution: we have added a new preamble which sets out briefly the role and responsibility of students as members of the academic community, and as members of society with duties and obligations, and expresses our commitment to human and academic freedom and non racialism in principle and in practice, particularly in practice. Then we restructured the Executive, established a new relationship with the SRC's and SRC Presidents, redesigned the local committees, set up three new affiliate organisations, made provision for new associate organisations and new relationships with campuses, with Afrikaans and Black students as well as the English campuses. We have made provision for individual membership through affiliate organisations, and maintained and strengthened the benefits of centre affiliation. Increased the salaried officials. Planned some 30 programs and projects; tripled

the size of the executive and incorporated all these changes in the constitution itself.

Varsity: Money?

Curtis: My pet hate. we have doubled income over last year, but our annual budget has grown from R15,000 (running costs) to R23,000 as we have expanded activities. We have a deficit of R5000 (R2000 less than last year) but will meet this from fundraising. In addition we will increase the amount spent on projects annually from R16,000 to R20,000 and our reserves remain at about R13,000. All in all things look healthier than before, and we have a large fundraising campaign planned. We have increased affiliation fees, and all SRC's will be debating these. Wits SRC have approved them already.

Varsity: So NUSAS is not bankrupt?

Curtis: No, far from, but because we are going to expand enormously we are going to need more. We can easily use about R100,000, and if some kind-hearted soul would like to donate that to us it will all be put to excellent use in the new projects.

Varsity: Could you elaborate on these projects, and the new affiliate organisations as these seem to be related?

Curtis: A strong emphasis at Congress was laid on less talk and more action. As a result we spent much time implementing projects and programs, and set up three new affiliate organisations to implement these within the broad framework of NUSAS policy and structure. The new organisations to implement these within the broad framework of NUSAS policy and structure. The new organisations are NUSED (National Union of Students Education Department) NUSWEL (National Union of Students Welfare and Social Action Department); and AQUARIUS (National Union of students Cultural, Academic and otherwise Organisation.

NUSED is concerned with education - education reform; assistance to students; expansion of education; research and defence of students rights in education.

NUSWEL will be concerned with 'putting students behind the plough' as it were. Engaging students in community action- every from building schools, running literacy campaigns teaching, tutoring and coaching, fundraising, Headstart and community leadership projects, and civil rights campaigns. Also trying to co-ordinate student activity and different campuses and between different organisations.

There will be no question of competition with S'JS or SHAWCO and other organisation but simply of co-operation. There is more than enough to be done for all of us to do it.

AQUARIUS we envisage as a cultural and intellectual forum. Running a magazine and newspaper, convening cultural events of different sorts ranging through pop festivals, through drama, poetry, films, literature and other forms of expression. Some exciting ideas have emerged like guerrilla theatre, a campaign on censorship, national film festival - and a happening planned for a week in December to be called 'IP' We want to find creative expression for South Africans and find something which is neither black nor white but both original and vital.

Under each of these organisations there are eight specific projects which would take a lot of space to detail, but the campus will be

Under each of these organisations there are eight specific projects which would take a lot of space to detail, but the campus will be hearing much more of all of them. To make it all work there is a total of 30 Executive members, most already elected at congress.

Varsity:

So much of the policy then seems to be in fact projects; but what about the straight policy decisions taken as a Congress. SASO for example?

Curtis:

In outline the new policy emerged as more determinedly non-racial and more firmly committed to action towards change in all the spheres of NUSAS - educational, cultural welfare and politics.. Thus our commitment to principle was strengthened, by committing ourselves more firmly to action. The major issues actually debated aside from the constitution were SASO, and individual membership.

2

The SASO debate, which stretched over twelve hours touched all the fundamental issues facing NUSAS and South African students - the questions of the relationships between, different race and language groups, the political and other roles of students, **the political and other roles of students**, the question of the very existence of NUSAS. What emerged was a commitment to nonracialism, the rejection of any sort of dogma or ideology as a rigid policy for NUSAS and the adoption of a flexible approach of serving our ideals in the best manner possible instead of hiding behind them as ritual reaffirmations or pedantic posturings. A recognition that black students also have 'their thing' to do, but that we can co-operate and work together. A recognition of the limitations of the National Union and of its strengths.

The individual membership debate resolved the issue of the dissolution of NUSAS, accepted individual membership in principle (as contained in the new constitution individual membership within the affiliate organisations) strengthened the benefits to gained from, and retained centre affiliation, and stated clearly that SRC's must be more involved and must more actively play their role as representatives-channels between students and NUSAS. The surprising thing was the lack of dissent and the near-unanimity reached after hours of debate amongst people of different background and points of view, and this fruitful and constructive debate, possibly more than anything else, bore testimony to the strength of NUSAS and its principles.

Varsity:

What about Nafsas?

Curtis:

What about Nafsas? There were two delegates from the May Congress of Nafsas present both agreed with the decisions taken, one playing a major role as deputy speaker of the House during the parliamentary debate. Otherwise Nafsas was hardly mentioned except to note that the black students at SASO had rejected it after hearing McMinn. We bear Nafsas no hostility, agree with them on some things like the need for contact - and have done so for 46 years - but disagree with them on most other things & like compromising with apartheid.

Varsity:

ASB and Afrikaans students?

Curtis:

There were reps from three Afrikaans Universities as both observers and delegates, including Potch, NUSAS always pledged co-operation. Afrikaans remains an official language of NUSAS. I will visit and address as many Afrikaans campuses as are prepared to listen. The ASB ignored our invitation officially, but unofficially sent two observers for a brief spell.

Varsity: What about other student groups?
Curtis: SASO reps were present throughout, NCIS (Catholic students) were present and like SASO, addressed the assembly. UCM, ASF sent reps, There were seven international observers from Britain, Sweden, Germany, Finland and of the course the Inimitable Tony Klug deputy President of NUS (National Union of Students in Britain 400,000 strong) Also observers from half a dozen non student organisations and almost all the press. Mrs Fatima Meer opened congress with a memorable address which we hope to circulate*, and Father Desmond author of 'The Discarded People' also addressed the assembly. Alan Paton was invited to become Honorary President again. The Vice Chancellors of affiliated centres were again invited to become Honorary Vice Presidents.

* printed in Newsletter No 22.

Varsity: What about new office bearers?
Curtis: We have the strongest Executive ever. Students from every major centre in NUSAS are on the 30 man Executive. English speaking, Afrikaans speaking, and black.

Varsity: Congress was much criticised. How would you explain it?
Curtis: Nuses has always been controversial. It is a sign of life and thinking. Disagreement is the thing we welcome next after participation because it means dialogue is taking place. Personally I am sick of conformity and Ja baasing and a little chaos and dispute and dare I say the word, anarchy, has its place in this overordered, authority conscious, accepting with open mouth and gaping jaw society. But enough I sound like a preacher.

Varsity: How would you summarise congress?
Curtis: Floreat NUSAS.