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By Nick Murray

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The motion called for changes to the Sexual Offences Act 1967 which prohibits homosexual relations between males aged under 21 – most student homosexuals are under that age. The motion was overwhelmingly carried. The debate was one of the most efficient and interesting of the conference and was being interpreted by some as a sign of a shift from political to social matters in student affairs. It was interesting also to see the clash between those who wanted to see a reform of attitudes and those who wanted the gay struggle to be integrated into an overall struggle to smash capitalism. One speaker talked of the danger of homosexuals being ‘alienated by revolutionary dogma’.

The success of the motion was largely due to the persistent activism of a small pressure group which grew out of the Margate conference in 1972 to press N.U.S. to do something about the estimated 5 percent of its membership who were homosexual. As a result of their activity the motion was placed third in priority out of 86 possible debates in a poll.

Media

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Liverpool delegates in attentive mood at Exeter

At the recent NUS Conference in Exeter, shortly after the announcement of John Randall's victory, outgoing President Digby Jacks leaned across to the new President-elect, seated to his left on the platform, and shook hands. Just as he did so two television cameramen mounted the stage and edged their way along the narrow space in front of the platform.

One of them flashed an exposure meter in the face of Digby Jacks and the other levelled his portable lamp in the direction of the latter. Digby Jacks gestured to Jacks to repeat his shaking hands with Randall but the outgoing President refused. Nevertheless the cameraman stood his ground for his required feet of film and Conference roared its ironic approval at the consequent blurring of the proceedings. Grimacing all the time under the camera's eye Jacks muttered through his teeth at the platform microphone in a plaintive tone: "What would you do in a situation like this?"

Serious debate

For me this was a fitting symbol of what N.U.S. Conferences are really like: the mixture of high seriousness and farce; the love-hate relationship with the media; the backstabbing and vicious political infighting, and the backslapping camaraderie which you find at any student gathering. Yet in spite of being in some ways one of the silliest conferences for some time (according to veteran delegates) a great deal of serious debate took place and conference gave an impressive display of its determination to think and act politically on a range of important issues currently facing students: autonomy, grants, rent strikes, small colleges, the rights of homosexuals in constituent organisations of N.U.S. and many other topics.

The major event of conference as far as the media was concerned was the election of the new President of N.U.S. John Randall, who will succeed the present President,

Communist Digby Jacks. There had been a great deal of what one newspaper called "histrionic" manoeuvring before the elections with references to "unofficial left caucuses" "machine politics" etc. What in fact had happened was that each of the various ultra-left groups, namely the International Socialists, the International Marxist Group and the Socialist Labour League put up separate slates of far left candidates for the elections for executive members.

Take the Independent

Other elections included Stuart Paul as Deputy President, Jeff Stanforth, National Treasurer; Steve Parry, National Secretary; Geoff Robinson, Charles Clarke, J. W. Cashman and Judith Cotter as the four specialist Vice-Presidents. Liverpool's External Affairs Secretary Dave Toke was defeated in the election for Executive Committee Member. At the hustings he described himself as an "independent" and attacked "fragmentation" which would lead to the "strait-jacket of sectarianism" and the possibility of "a right wing resurgence". Toke, like the Liverpool University delegation itself, is a moderate in the context of N.U.S. Conference politics and is known to be more in favour of the trades union approach to student politics than the Trotskyist attempts to build what he calls a "pseudo-revolutionary party".

revolutionary

They were opposed to the existing power bloc of Communists and orthodox left wing socialists on N.U.S. Executive, most of whom are committed to the idea of N.U.S. as a trade union fighting for the defence of student interests. The Socialist alternative favoured a more aggressive conception of student politics which would make N.U.S. a more committed revolutionary socialist body. The ruling left caucus on the N.U.S. executive

had chosen its candidate in Mike Terry, 25, secretary of N.U.S. for the past two years.

John Randall also aged 25 and a graduate of York University, where he read biology and education for a joint degree, who was elected President on a close vote, belonged to neither of these two groups and calls himself an independent socialist. He said that his victory had been a defeat for the so-called left caucus and its "machine politics". He is married with a seven week old son and is the son of a senior civil servant in the Department of Health and Social Security.

He said after his election that he had three priorities. These would be (a) to continue the grants campaign, (b) to continue the fight for union autonomy, (c) to concentrate on specifically educational matters. In particular he would like to see educational institutions thrown open to the general public. His election is not being interpreted as a sign of any significant change in the direction of N.U.S.

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The conference also decided to intensify the current rent strike campaign, in spite of the fact that the Union's own legal advisers, in a document circulated to delegates had advised unequivocally that

such action was strictly illegal. Derek Lemon spoke on rent strikes.

In the debate on Union Autonomy the Executive was instructed to continue the fight for autonomy and an amendment tabled by Liverpool University among others advocated negotiation with the D.E.S. and L.E.A.s for a standard Union fee. Dave Toke and Derek Lemon spoke and played a crucial part in the passing of this amendment. Another amendment called for a guarantee to the demand from the Labour leadership that any future Labour Government will remove any legal restrictions on student autonomy. Another amendment called on all constituent organisations of N.U.S. to relinquish their charitable status in spite of the tax concessions such status gives. Minority motions on health service and disabled students, drama colleges and positive aid for smaller colleges were discussed.

"struggle"

One of the more amusing casualties of the Conference were the Young Socialists, youth wing of the Socialist Labour League whose daily organ is Workers Press. The Y.S. had put up a wide slate of candidates all of whom unfortunately appeared to have the same ideas i.e. the need to bring down "this Tory government" and "re-elect a Labour government pledged to socialist policies". All these strategies required "struggle". Each time any of the Y.C. candidates stood up to speak (which was quite often) he would be greeted with ironic cheers from the delegates. One of the more prominent Young Socialists Mr. Brian Prangle was greeted with cries of "struggle" every time he got up to speak. It was refreshing to see that the flood of often facile political rhetoric had not jaded the natural good humour of conference.

Finally, for those who are numbered among the fanatical admirers of Digby Jacks this is the anthem which was sung in his praise in the middle of the night

before the conference ended outside the halls of residence of Exeter University where the delegates were staying:

"I was born under the Morning Star (repeat)
Trots are meant for bashing
Stalinists are hacks
We all know who's the students' friend
His name is Digby Jacks."

The results in last month's Metropolitan elections provided the latest evidence of the behaviour of the student vote. The elections were significant because, coming in April instead of May, the students were on vacation. Although the turnout was generally down, the Liberals retained both Arundel and St. Michael's and the parties' shares of the poll remained substantially the same.

In other words, like the "flappers" before them, students in Liverpool do not vote as a block at all. It is less useful to consider the student vote than the student voters.

There are 281 candidates for the 99 seats—98 Labour, 97 Tories, 7 Liberals, 8 Communists and 2 Independents.

The Liverpool District Council will exercise substantially similar powers to the present City Council although strategic planning powers now belong to the Labour controlled Metropolitan Council. Local, rather than National, issues seem to be dominating the campaign.

Labour are defending their record since they regained control of the Council last year. The Fair Rents issue, which the pundits believe was largely responsible for Labour's victory, appears to have been forgotten. Certainly the splits which rocked the party following the Council's decision to implement the Act have been patched up as the party fights to remain in power. But the Tenants' candidate polled surprisingly well last month against Labour leader Bill Sefton in Sandhills/Vauxhall. Sefton, who is now fighting in Anfield, says the Labour Party had to implement the Act when other councils gave up the fight.

An embarrassment to Labour is the 25% rate increase which they have just imposed. Sefton claims that this is the unavoidable effect of Inflation but the Tories have called for £3 million cuts in Corporation spending to reduce the rates. Labour say this would cause unacceptable redundancies.

The Liberals—who believe that they can win control of Liverpool for the first time since 1885—are campaigning on a policy of "first things first". They have promised to channel money to Education, Social Services and Environmental improvements by axing the £40 million Civic Centre, Liverpool Airport and the Inner Motorway scheme. But both Labour and Tories say that these projects are essential.

One notable omission from the campaign has been any attempt to raise student issues. Your councillors of both the Labour and Liberal groups on the Council have tried to raise problems such as discretionary awards and student accommodation but without any conspicuous success. Many local politicians believe that, whoever wins on Thursday, students could, if they wished, play a much more active role in Liverpool politics by asserting their electoral strength.

CHRIS GRAHAM

Students and the local elections — Chris Graham investigates

Liverpool goes to the polls on 10th May to elect a new 99 member Liverpool District Council. The new Council, which will take over from the City Council on 1st April 1974, will be one of five new bottom-tier authorities under the Merseyside Metropolitan Council, which was elected last month.

The 33 Liverpool wards will each elect three councillors. Last month's elections in Liverpool produced 17 Labour, 13 Liberal and 3 Conservative wards. So if Thursday's voting goes the same way, Labour would have a majority of three over the Liberals and Tories. With Labour and Liberal both claiming that they will rob each other of crucial marginal wards, the election is, in the words of the Echo, "virtually

a straight Labour/ Liberal fight". It could conceivably be the student vote which decides whether Labour or the Liberals run Liverpool for the next four years.

But how many students will vote? The question is being asked by local politicians, who believe that the student vote is crucial in several wards, and by student leaders, who have seen in "votes at 18" a new source of influence in politics.

When the voting age was lowered in 1969, N.U.S. launched a campaign to persuade students to get themselves on the electoral lists in their college constituencies. An N.U.S. sponsored test case established that students could be registered both at home and in their college constituencies and could

vote in both at local elections. Wardens of Halls of Residence have a statutory duty to register every resident.

Just how many students in flats or digs have bothered to make sure that they are registered is impossible to say. Most observers agree that many who are qualified are not in fact on the voters lists.

The biggest concentration of Liverpool students is probably in two Sefton Park wards, in the Toxteth constituency—the stomping ground of marathon walker Dick Crawshaw, M.P. Arundel Ward, on the east side of the park, includes among its 14,000 electors the four Greenbank Halls and an unknown number of student flat-dwellers in the Smithdown Road/ Ullet Road area. St. Michael's

Ward, on the west side, includes the former Rankin Hall as well as a College of Education. The Lark Lane area accounts for over 4,000 of the ward's 11,000 voters, most of them flat-dwellers, many of whom are students.

Other wards with Halls of Residence are Church Ward (Carnatic, Aigburth (Dale), and Fairfield (University Hall) but in none is the Hall vote large enough to be large enough to be decisive. Only marginal Fairfield has a significant number of flat-dwelling students to add to the Hall vote. Other wards have no Halls but still have a substantial number of students in flats. Probably the biggest student vote is in the Labour stronghold of Princes Park.

A complicating factor will as

usual be the number of removals since the register was compiled last October. The voters of old Rankin Hall, for example, are still qualified to vote in St. Michael's Ward although the Hall has now closed.

Liberal gains in 1971 in Arundel and St. Michael's (both formerly solid Tory wards) were put down to the student vote. In neither case was the analysis correct. No explanation was advanced as to why students should vote Liberal (or even why they should vote at all) and a less appealing candidate for students than a President of Guild would be hard to imagine. Both results were part of a quite different phenomenon which has since been manifested in wards where the student vote is negligible.