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The Student Congress Movement Comes of Age

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I.

The Student Congress Movement has come of age!

Exactly twenty-one years have passed since that auspicious day in 1927 when it had its birth in a Model League of Nations Assembly, sponsored by the School of Citizenship and Public Affairs of Syracuse University.

This might therefore be an appropriate time to engage in a few biographical reminiscences and a bit of friendly evaluation. Let us go back to the beginning.

As an infant the Student Congress was small, but certainly no one can deny that it was lusty. Educators everywhere not only welcomed its arrival, but they were eager to foster its growth and development. Here, they said, is something for which we have long been searching—a really practicable device for putting training in public speaking and parliamentary procedure to work in the deliberation of vital public problems.

Before young Master Student Congress was many years old he had begun to travel. One of his first stops was at a Model Legislative Convention sponsored in the spring of 1933 by the New York Debate Coaches Conference. Soon he had visited Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kansas, Oklahoma, Iowa, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Maine and California. In 1938 he covered the entire country. That was the year both Pi Kappa Delta and the National Forensic League held Congresses which were nation-wide in character. The following year the first National Student Congress of Delta Sigma Rho took place in Washington, D. C.

Perhaps by now our whimsical allegory has gone far enough. Here are the literal facts: Joseph F. O'Brien, writing in 1940, was able to list no less than fifteen regional or national Legislative Conferences, organized on a permanent basis and convened at regularly appointed intervals.

As we might expect, during the war years the Student Congress Movement was hidden in the general eclipse which blotted out most of our intercollegiate forensic activities. With the return of peace, however, it again sprang into prominence. The spring of 1947 saw an unprecedented amount of healthy activity in all parts of the country. Congresses mushroomed everywhere, and everywhere they were eagerly attended.

Viewed objectively, only one conclusion is possible: Whether we like it or not, the Student Congress is here to stay. Within its short life-time it has become firmly entrenched as an integral part of

our extra-curricular speaking program.

Thus far the picture has been uniformly rosy. One must in all candor, however, confess that of late there have been a number of discordant strains in the general symphony of universal praise. The Student Congress Movement is suffering today from the attacks of a critical minority which is constantly making itself more and more vociferous.

The charges of the indictment are roughly as follows: "A Congress usually degenerates into a mere parliamentary haggle." "It promotes unbridled vote-trading and underhanded 'politicking.'" "Sound deliberation of issues is lost in the steam-roller tactics of party machines and prearranged pork-barrel deals."

To deny that some of these charges have a considerable element of validity would, we recognize, be quite impossible. But, at the same time, to assert that these evils are inevitable concomitants of the Congress plan is, we believe, completely unwarranted.

The writers have suffered through some student congresses which displayed every one of the various faults that critics point out—as well as a few others which apparently have not yet come to their attention. On the other hand, it has been our pleasure to attend some congresses which in our opinion represented the highest and most praiseworthy type of forensic endeavor.

As a result of these experiences, we have come to two conclusions. (1) The Congress plan is in itself fundamentally sound. (2) Whether any particular congress will be a success or a failure depends entirely upon the care with which it is planned and organized, and on the spirit in which it is conducted.

Only one proviso needs to be entered. It is this: The success of a Congress, as is true of any other type of forensic event, rests in part upon what might be termed "the human element." Student delegates must adopt and maintain those attitudes of cooperation and fair play which are essential to fruitful argumentative deliberation and true creative thinking. Unless they can be educated to do this, the Congress cannot succeed. Nor is such education a quick or easy process. We cannot expect that our expert competitive debaters will become expert parliamentary debaters or skilled discussion group members over night. Time and patience are required to train them in the new and strange techniques of cooperative social decision.

Despite this fact, it is still possible—working with the human material we

have here and now—to do much toward insuring the success of any Congress venture. By careful planning we can iron out in advance many of the “bugs” which tangle up the machinery of a smooth-working legislative organization and result in the evils of parliamentary haggling and “politicking” which are so loudly decried.

With this aim in mind, we offer the following specific suggestions. They are not absolutely fool-proof, nor are they all-inclusive. However, we do feel that each of them has a considerable degree of merit in and of itself, and that collectively they constitute the decalogue of a successful student congress.

II.

(1) As a general rule, the success of a Congress is directly dependent upon the amount of time devoted to the consideration of legislation in the committee sessions. Hasty and ill-considered action at this level will inevitably detract from the effectiveness of the debate in the General Assembly meetings. We believe that three two-hour committee sessions are absolute minimum. More may be desirable.

For this reason, a one-day congress is almost certainly pre-doomed to failure. Whenever possible, a two or three-day meeting should be planned.

(2) It is desirable to have legislation reported to the General Assembly in the form of resolutions rather than of bills. This removes the necessity of drawing up elaborate documents, with enabling clauses, plans for financing, administration, etc. As a result, committees are able to center all of their attention upon the fundamental merits and weaknesses of a given policy and are relieved of the obligation of working out numerous technical details.

Are not most of the bills submitted in our national and state legislative bodies drawn up by research experts, rather than by the legislators themselves? Why should we expect students to be able to write exhaustive and fool-proof legislation when our congressmen do not feel equal to the task?

(3) Delegates who desire to introduce resolutions for consideration at the Congress should be required to submit copies of their proposals at least three weeks prior to the meeting. These may be mimeographed and copies sent to all participating schools. If all delegates have an opportunity to study in advance the various resolutions which they will be called upon to discuss, considerable time will be saved in getting the committee sessions under way, and committee action will be more intelligent and purposeful.

(4) We suggest that the names of all student delegates attending the Congress, together with a statement of their party

affiliations, also be submitted several weeks in advance. Party commitments at that time should be final.

At a recent Congress, the balance of party power was dangerously upset by numerous switches in allegiance which were made after the conference was actually under way.

(5) Each political party should have the privilege of nominating candidates for the various offices of the Congress. In some cases in the past, the so-called Independent Party has been denied this right. The result was a wild orgy of vote trading in which the identity of the disenfranchised party was practically lost. Consequently, it was unable to make its point of view felt in the General Assembly meetings.

(6) Committees must be as small as possible. If a committee is too large to engage in informal roundtable discussion and has to fall back on parliamentary procedure in order to get its business done, many of the values of this part of the Congress will be lost.

Furthermore, each committee should be so organized that the various political parties are represented in proportion to their total strength in the Congress, and it should contain the individuals who submitted the specific resolutions which are assigned for its consideration.

We cannot too much stress this last suggestion. In more than one Congress good resolutions have been completely overlooked simply because their sponsors had no opportunity to explain and defend them in committee sessions.

(7) Once the Congress is under way, it is highly desirable that its direction be placed in so far as practicable in the hands of a Student Steering Committee. This committee may well consist of the Speaker of the Assembly, the Vice-president of the Congress, the Party Floor Leaders and the Clerks.

Decisions as to which of the resolutions reported out of committee will come before the General Assembly, and the order in which they will be debated, as well as other pertinent matters concerning the conduct of the conference, are to be left entirely to the discretion of this group.

Here, as elsewhere, faculty interference in the actual operation of the conference must be reduced to an absolute minimum.

(8) Each participating school should submit in advance the names of those students who in the opinion of its faculty advisor are qualified to fill the various Congress offices. If nominations are limited to persons thus recommended, the direction of the Congress will be in the hands of officers whose ability and training eminently qualify them to carry out their duties efficiently.

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ament; College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio.
April:

9-10—Ohio Association of College Teachers of Speech Spring Meeting in Conjunction with Ohio College Association.

16-17—Ohio State Speech League Drama and Poetry Reading Finals; Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

17—Ohio Association of College Teachers of Speech—First Year Debate Tournament; Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.

OKLAHOMA

Oct. 16, 17, 18. Annual Debate and Discussion Institute for High Schools and Colleges, University of Oklahoma.

Nov. 7, 8. Poetry Festival, Oklahoma College for Women, Chickasha.

Nov. 14, 15. District High School Forensic Tournament, Phillips University, Enid.

Dec. District High School Forensic Tournament, Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee.

Dec. College Invitational Forensic Tournament, East Central State College, Ada.

Jan. District High School Forensic

Tournament, Southeastern State College, Durant.

Jan. Classen High School Invitational Debate Tournament, Oklahoma City.

Feb. 12, 13. State Speech Conference at the Oklahoma Educational Association meeting, Tulsa.

Feb. Intercollegiate Discussion and Debate Conference, University of Oklahoma.

Feb. Savage Forensic Tournament, Southeastern State College, Durant.

Feb. District High School Forensic Tournaments: East Central State College, Ada, and Southwestern Institute of Technology, Weatherford.

March District High School Forensic Tournaments: Northwestern State College, Alva; Panhandle A and M College, Goodwell; Central State College, Edmond; Northwestern State College, Tahlequah.

March Oklahoma Junior College Forensic Tournament, University of Oklahoma.

March Poetry Festival, University of Oklahoma.

April State Contests of the Oklahoma High School Speech League, University of Oklahoma.

The Student Congress Movement Comes of Age (Cont'd).

We do not pretend that such controlled elections are entirely desirable. It would be far better if nominations could be made freely and openly. However, the success of a Congress depends so directly upon the calibre of its student officers that a compromise with the ideal is more than justified in this instance.

(9) We suggest that the first thirty minutes of each General Assembly session be devoted exclusively to the consideration of the majority and minority reports drawn up by the committee presenting resolutions. The proponents of each of these points of view should have previously arranged opportunities to explain their proposals and to argue in their favor.

Only at the end of this period should the Assembly consider the various amendments which members may wish to advance relative to these prepared reports.

In this way the merits of each committee's proposals will receive full attention, and parliamentary maneuvering will be greatly reduced. Careful organization of floor debate by party leaders is one of the keys to a successful Congress.

(10) The common practice of referring to Robert's RULES OF ORDER for guidance on all matters of procedure not specifically covered in the rules drawn up for a particular Congress is, we believe, a bad one.

Robert's RULES were designed for the purpose of dispatching immediate business which arises in connection with the activities of groups organized for purposes other than the study of public problems. They are not well suited to

intelligent legislative deliberation. It is inconceivable that our national or state legislative bodies could operate under them.

Perhaps we should take a cue from these bodies and experiment with the use of Canon's or Jefferson's RULES in some of our student Congress meetings. Whether or not this would be completely successful is somewhat problematical, although they would certainly be an improvement over Roberts'.

The ideal solution, we feel, would be a complete set of rules designed specifically for the use of student legislative congresses. Eventually these may be worked out. The national forensic societies might even undertake such a project on a joint basis. Certainly, their energies could be less well spent.

III.

These, then, are our suggestions for improving the organization and management of a Student Congress. We offer them for what they may be worth because we sincerely feel that the Congress plan is too valuable a thing to let deteriorate. No other form of intercollegiate speaking activity so well combines all of the argumentative processes which must enter into the formulation of sound policies of social action.

Therefore, let us reform where we must and improve where we can. The Student Congress Movement, despite its faults, is still the brightest star on our stormy forensic horizon.

This year, as it comes of age, we can certainly do no less than to wish it well!

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