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## Shaping Canada: Students as Activists

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## **Shaping Canada: Students as Activists**

### **Presenters:**

- Michael Bueckert is a PhD candidate in Sociology and Political Economy at Carleton University. He has extensive experience in the student movement at Carleton, having served as the President of the Graduate Students' Association, the Graduate Caucus Chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario, and is currently a student representative on the university's Board of Governors. He is also involved in the Palestinian solidarity movement.
- Maggie FitzGerald Murphy is a PhD student in the Department of Political Science and the Institute of Political Economy, Carleton University. Her research is centered on the ethics of care, governing norms, critical political theory, and feminism, and she is a member of the social justice group Reproductive Justice New Brunswick.
- Ridhwan Khan is currently an M.A. student with the Institute of Political Economy, Carleton University. His research interests include critical legal studies, critical race theory, political economy, and American politics. Ridhwan served as panel moderator.
- Lauren Montgomery is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology, with a specialization in Political Economy, at Carleton University. Lauren is a dedicated student-activist, who has been leading the student fight against rape culture at Carleton University.
- Steven Orr is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at Carleton University. He has been involved in provincial and federal electoral campaigns. He also runs a podcast on Canadian politics and has an active Twitter account on all things political.
- Anna Przednowek is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Work at Carleton University. Prior to pursuing her PhD, Anna worked for over 14 years in South-Western Ontario as a social worker. Her research weds her clinical practice experience and her concern for the conditions that affect the lives of people labelled with Intellectual Disabilities and their caregivers.

### **1. Introduction**

This roundtable is meant to provide a space for students to discuss our experiences as activists and to consider some of the major challenges we face as we try to envision and work towards a 'better' Canada. In particular, we aim to explore how our particular positionalities as students create unique opportunities and obstacles as we strive to act as agents of change for a variety of causes, ranging from formal political party campaigns, to the reproductive justice movement, to immigrant/migrant rights activism, and more.

### **2. Opening Remarks**

*Anna Przednowek:*

*Steven Orr:* There is something strange about sitting on a panel about students as activists when the work that I have done that perhaps qualifies me to sit here is fairly traditional: I have worked on both federal and provincial election campaigns from political parties, not from without. Which is fine by me, because I think that sort of work is meaningful and important, but it removes me somewhat from the label of “activist”. By and large this is a good thing, because I am not entirely sure what is to be gained by distinguishing what perhaps some of these other panels will label as their activist experiences and my attempts to negotiate the levers of political power from within mainstream politics and political institutions. This is especially true in the way that activism has become somewhat of a dirty word in the contemporary political landscape – in much the same way that special interests and lobbyists have for prior eras, which continue to influence the way groups approach politics to this day. Meaningful and engaged politics requires having a vision for how one wishes the future to be, to maintain the norms and values of the present into the future or to change them. That, more than anything else, is what positions me as a political actor in addition (and complementary) to my status as student.

*Michael Bueckert:* Over the last few years I have been active in the student movement. This has involved campus-based activism, as I had leadership roles with the Graduate Students’ Association and currently serve as a graduate representative on the Board of Governors, but I’ve also been involved provincially and nationally through the Canadian Federation of Students.

One of the major priorities for the student movement has been pushing for affordable and accessible post-secondary education, and specifically for a national education strategy and the elimination of tuition fees. In this way students have been articulating a transformative vision in which post-secondary education would be valued in society as a right and as a public good.

Additionally, students have been active in fighting for students’ rights on campus, and pushing back against corporatization, which is a trend in which universities are increasingly run as for-profit businesses rather than as communities of scholars. At Carleton we have been protesting changes to the university’s governance structures and working to democratize the university, especially at the Board level.

I’ve also been involved in various forms of human rights activism on campus, and specifically within the Palestinian solidarity movement. Campus-based activism plays a key role in this struggle, as universities provide a space where it is possible to truthfully discuss the issue. In the broader context, it is not possible to criticize Israeli policies without being demonized and stigmatized, and false accusations of anti-Semitism have the effect of significantly suppressing speech. Therefore boycott campaigns, workshops, and other educational initiatives are critical in challenging and re-shaping the political consensus.

*Lauren Montgomery:* My activism began and is rooted in the Canadian student movement and the Canadian labour movement. Prior to my work at CUPE 4600, I was the VP-External of the Graduate Student’s Association at Carleton, and the Treasurer of the National Graduate Caucus for the Canadian Federation of Student’s (CFS). During my PhD I held multiple positions at CUPE 4600, the union representing TAs and CIs at Carleton. As the VP-Internal and Women’s Caucus Chair, I worked as the stakeholder for the union on the creation of the Carleton Sexual Violence Policy.

CUPE 4600 advocated for a survivor-centered policy, geared towards addressing root causes of sexual violence. We focused on challenging the toxic ‘risk management’ approach that the upper

level administrators of the university took towards the policy, and emphasized the need for a survivor-centred policy that supports survivors/victims of sexual violence. Survivor-centered policies are ones that recognize the severity and complexity of sexual violence, and are geared towards treating survivors with compassion and respect. We sought to highlight that sexual violence is a community issue that requires community solutions. In the text of the policy, this meant including the term and application of intersectional lens to the understanding of sexual violence; and the inclusion of the terms rape culture, and survivor-centred. In practice this meant advocating for increased access to trauma-informed mental health and medical services; consent training in undergraduate and graduate orientations; mandatory training for all new employees, faculty, and volunteers; consent training incorporated into curriculum; and, increased funding for Equity Services (who provide some services to survivors/victims of sexual violence).

Engaging in anti-violence activism as a student has some incredible benefits and challenges. Particularly working within the labour movement on campus, which is still an area that is ripe with sexism and racism. I am eager and thankful to be able to speak to some of these challenges and benefits today.

*Maggie FitzGerald Murphy:* The majority of my recent activism has been linked to reproductive justice. In particular, I've been working with a group called Reproductive Justice New Brunswick. Formally, the mission statement for this group is:

Our mission is to work towards building a place where all people can access the healthcare they need to thrive and are empowered to decide if, when, and how to have or parent children, with dignity and support.

In practice, however, we have spent the past 4 years largely working to change provincial legislation which greatly restricts access to abortion services in New Brunswick. Most notably, when Henry Morgentaler passed away, we fundraised the money necessary to purchase the Morgentaler Clinic in Fredericton, and hired a doctor from Vancouver to come and operate the clinic. This clinic is one of only two places where you can receive a medical abortion in the province, and also focuses on providing health care to queer and trans- folks.

We are very proud of this achievement, although much work remains to be done in terms of providing accessible abortion services. For instance, abortions performed in the clinic are not covered under the New Brunswick health care system, and will cost patients about \$800 out of pocket. While abortions performed in the Moncton Hospital – the only other in-province site offering abortions – are covered, patients are required to go to Moncton for an initial assessment, and then to return two weeks later for the actual procedure. This requires a lot of travel for patients from various parts of the province, and is also very expensive in terms of time – time away from work, from family responsibilities, and so on. Furthermore, when these patients return to their homes, there is no systemic provision of after and follow-up care.

Because these barriers persist, I've continued to work with RJNB, despite now living here in Ottawa to pursue graduate school – although this arrangement has resulted in its own challenges. I look forward to discussing some of the joys and frustrations of the student-activist nexus with you all today.

### 3. Questions:

- a. What does activism look like for us, as students? What do we mean by activism?

*Anna Przednowek:*

*Steven Orr:* As a student – and as someone beginning his career as an educator – it is spirited, thoughtful, and informed debate about the issues that matter to us, as students, and those around us who have significant influence over our ability to act in this space. Universities are these strange spaces unlike the educational institutions we came out of prior, and unlike the workplaces we will go to afterwards. The freedom to explore and express ideas, often no matter the content or context of those thoughts, is unmatched for this brief period in our lives. And I think it has the capacity to shape the broader society in which we are embedded. So, by activism (insofar as I accept the term) I mean the challenges we face here and the challenges we put out into the broader world *from* here.

*Michael Bueckert:* Activism takes many different forms, and can look like demonstrations and direct action, or research and lobbying, for example. In the student union context, activism often looks like struggles for representation; that is, fighting to include students meaningfully in university decision-making. Although representation is not a particularly exciting cause, there are significant implications for the ability to influence decisions on tuition fees, strategic planning, and policies regarding sexual violence, so that these decisions better reflect the actual priorities of those who study and work on campus.

As a side note, it is somewhat unique that everyone on this panel is a graduate student, as in my experience student activism is by and large led by undergraduates, whose leadership and energy is incredibly inspiring.

It is worth pointing out that today we [the panelists] are mostly talking about left-wing activism. There are, of course, conservative activists on campus as well, and especially at Carleton. However, these right-wing and centre-right student “leaders” are largely concerned with maintaining the status quo and building positive relationships with administration, rather than advocating on behalf of students. It is not just a matter of the lack of militancy: their priorities are fundamentally at odds with the vision and goals of my student movement which seeks to challenge existing power relationships and redistribute resources in a more egalitarian manner.

*Lauren Montgomery:* I see the term activism as a deeply personal thing. I often understand activism as a series of actions that are in some way designed to push for positive and progressive social change. I define activism very broadly. I define activism to be understood in a broad way that encompasses various activities such as letter writing campaigns, protests, and direct actions, along with other forms of activism. Obviously, activism occurs at all points on the political spectrum; however, as an activist who considers themselves on the left, I obviously consider positive and progressive social change to progressive social change to the left side of the political spectrum. Activism for me means creating and building a strong movement on the left.

*Ridhwan Khan:* Activism, for me, is advocacy for social and political change in whatever capacity one is able to contribute or engage. This includes participating in various advocacy organizations and campaigns (including formally political or direct action via protest and civil

disobedience), teaching (in the capacity as a TA) and learning (developing and challenging knowledge), union work, or community work. While these options may seem varied and arguably collapse activism with ordinary work, any action or measure that contributes to political change and addressing injustice and inequality produces activism.

*Maggie FitzGerald Murphy:* Activism, to me, is simply rigorous action to promote social and political change, and to address social injustices. Thus, I see research, teaching (both formally and informally), union work (for students, largely as TAs), attending conferences and developing transnational networks, and of course, meaningful participation in various organizations, like the ones we heard about in the opening remarks, as forms of activism.

- b. What are some of the challenges of working as a student-activist, and what are some of the benefits?

*Anna Przednowek:*

*Steven Orr:* Burnout, plain and simple. As a drawback, obviously. I know that when I got started, I never took the time to really consider my health – in all its forms – when given the opportunity to participate in discussions about the issues I found meaningful. I still don't really. Which has all kinds of impacts on everything from my physical wellbeing to my mental health to completing my schoolwork. The reality for me is that I view myself as incredibly privileged to have these opportunities now, at this point in my life where I have my health and the free time to throw myself at them (and the money to “waste” my free time in such an unproductive manner). As such, I see it as something of an obligation to do everything that I can, while I can, especially because there are those who can't take up the challenges in the same way.

*Michael Bueckert:* Through activism and organizing I have developed a completely different set of skills, which complements (and in some ways helpfully counter-acts) how we are trained to operate in academia. For example, in my case it has helped me learn how to write and speak in political and accessible language, which avoids jargon and is to the point. I find this tremendously valuable, and I hope that I am successful in translating some of these skills into my academic work.

There is a degree of overlap between my course of research and my activist work, that this poses a challenge in negotiating the line between supposedly “objective” research and “biased” activism. To an extent this binary is artificial and unhelpful, but there is an ounce of truth: as student-activists our research is motivated by a desire to change the world (following Marx), and there is a real risk of becoming attached to certain ideas or conclusions, or otherwise compromising our better academic judgment. After all, our research conclusions may have real-world implications for movements that we support, and the last thing we want is to undermine them. I am not sure if I have figured out how to address this tension, but it is something that we constantly be aware of.

*Lauren Montgomery:* Personally, there are so many unique challenges and benefits to engaging in activist work while simultaneously engaging in academic labour (as both a student-as academic work is a form of labour, and as a teaching assistant and research assistant). I firmly believe that being engaged in activist oriented and social justice oriented research requires that I remain concerned about my surroundings-and in this case the nature of academia. For me, this desire to challenge and push for progressive change in the space in which I learn and work (i.e

the University) is a crucial component to my academic work as well as my personal growth. My PhD doesn't mean anything to me if I am not working to push for positive and progressive social change in academia. I consider it a benefit and a privilege to be able to push for progressive change in this space. In addition, activist work not only leads to positive changes in our surroundings, but activism can also be a significant space for personal growth and challenges as well as an amazing space to make friends and connections within our communities. This positive personal growth includes the privilege to be able to take the time and emotional space to be able to learn and unlearn oppressive behaviours and systems and to be able to challenge them. To some degree there are less constraints to engaging in activism as a student than when you're working in the community or for government.

In addition, being able to engage in different forms of activist organizing (for example direct actions, letter writing campaigns, working in the labour movement, and doing anti-violence activism) has allowed me to grow confident and to develop skills that I wouldn't have had the chance to without it. For example, I learned how to handle media, to develop clear and articulate messaging around the issue of sexual violence; to strategize effectively and to develop long term campaigns dedicated to long term and short term objectives (around the issue of ending sexual violence); to develop new and different ways of engaging in public speaking and public education. Due to my activist new opportunities for professional development arose. For example, I was able to provide training for incorporating consent culture into the classroom for teaching assistants (and some professors), and how to handle disclosures of violence and addressing sexual violence through union structures. In addition, I was able to bargain new language around sexual violence and harassment. This allowed me to learn about the process of collective bargaining and the process of writing new language for collective agreements.

Of course, balancing academic labour and activist is challenging because all of these activities require both time, and emotional and intimate labour. This often means that time will be taken away from our school work, our friendships, and our relationships. In addition, it means that sometimes getting my PhD work takes longer than the required timelines that the university imposes. Engaging in academic work along with activism challenges how both of these types of labour are conceptualized, quantified, and qualified. This leads to a fundamental unsettling of the traditional ways that academics and academic labour are understood and seen both by students and the university.

In addition, I think it is pertinent to highlight that one significant challenges for many activists, myself included, especially those who do anti-violence activism is that many of us face violence from our peers and from individuals within institutions due to the activism that we do. You have to be able to get up the next day and the days after and face those peers and other individuals. I am often firmly reminded that the struggle to address rape culture and to foster a culture of consent is a constant project. This becomes especially poignant when I experienced victim blaming at the hands of my peers, or when I felt that my physical safety was no longer guaranteed given my public statements about the prominence of sexual violence and my own experiences with both sexual and domestic violence. I was constantly reminded of how fragile certain spaces, including academia could be and how quickly a space, which used to feel

somewhat safe could suddenly become violent. This became especially difficult for me when I heard my peers excuse the actions of rapists and condemn the actions of complainants and survivors. However, despite the emotional pain of that experience, I would argue that it was beneficial in that it forced me to really interrogate how I felt about activism within academia and amongst my academic peers, what the best methods and strategies were, and to really think about loving ways to address the heartbreaking experience in this work.

*Ridhwan Khan:*

Challenges:

-Balancing school work (major research), demands of activism, and life

Benefits:

-The ability to actualize one's research through activist work. In addition, to be engaged externally in one's field or with one's interest via activism instead of being alienated (physically, mentally and intellectually) to the rigors of independent research and writing.

*Maggie FitzGerald Murphy:* Challenges:

- moving to pursue school (severed ties, finding new organizations/movements that fit my concerns)

- work load – TAing/research/course work/life!

-precarity of student life: hard to fight for social justice and change when my own circumstances are often economically insecure

Benefits:

- I came to activism through critical thinking, which was fostered in the academy. I may not be an activist if it were not for my student role as well!

- Comradery of my fellow students, and the guidance I receive from professors, staff, and faculty who are also working very hard, every day, to foster change for the better.

c. How do we imagine the future of activism?

*Anna Przednowek:*

*Michael Bueckert:* Students have different class interests than administrators, both in terms of their structural position in the university, and their class composition. This means that there will always be a need for campus-based activism, as students fight for their collective interests.

There are positive signals of change, however, in that left-wing politicians have recently begun to adopt our vision of tuition-free education (for example, Bernie Sanders in the US, and certain elements within the NDP). This suggests that the student movement is having a cultural and political impact, and I am excited to see where this goes in the near future.

Activists in the Palestinian solidarity movement have had a lot of success in terms of educating people about the Palestinian struggle and shifting public opinion. A major challenge going forward is the heavy-handed strategy by opponents to shut down pro-Palestinian activists. This strategy includes slandering students as anti-Semites, pushing governments to condemn the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement, and in some cases introducing legislation that prevents organizations and institutions from



boycotting Israel. This repressive approach to suppress human rights activists and criticism of Israel poses a serious threat, but it also reflects desperation, and it may be a sign of how powerful our work has been over the past decade.

*Lauren Montgomery:* I imagine the future of activism as bright but full of challenges and new obstacles. I think that when we envision wider progressive social change and the future of activism, young people-especially precarious young people, play a crucial role in building this movement. The future of activism in Canada relies on older and/or more experienced activists and students mentoring and supporting those who are younger and/or less experienced. As progressive activists we need to be lifting each other up. We want to ensure that in the future we have set the framework and created the building blocks for a solid progressive movement.

We should be working to ensure that critiques amongst fractions on the left are useful that they remain loving critiques that can build a movement rather than creating fragmentation on the left. Building up and supporting young progressive youth is a large component of this.

For me, I want progressive activism, especially student and academic worker activism to be ever evolving, and hopefully self-reflective, and regenerative so that we can build a solid and consistent progressive base for future generations and leaders to build on. This need for self-reflection and interrogation is desperately needed within the anti-violence movement, as is the need to focus on loving critiques of one another and building regenerative anti-violence or consent culture movement. While we may falter and experience difficulties, reminding ourselves that inclusion, intersectionality, regenerative, and supportive and loving (along with kindness) needs to be both at the centre as well as at the front of anti-violence work. Engaging in this type of reflexive work is where I think the future of activism needs to be. IN the future our collective and our activists who take on leadership roles need to be challenging themselves and the way that we engage in and understand progressive organizing.

*Maggie FitzGerald Murphy:* Unfortunately, I see the future of activism becoming more challenging. I think this may not be the case for all change, and perhaps some of the current political unrest can be harnessed in a positive way – like we saw with the Women’s Marches around the world. However, given that my work is primarily concerned with reproductive justice, which has under the Trump/Pence government already seen some scary set-backs, including loss of funding for Planned Parenthood, and other international NGO’s that support abortion counselling and services, I am afraid that the future of my activism looks like trying to do more with less, and trying to fight battles that we thought were already – however imperfectly – won.