
The Millennium Youth Parliament

by Francis Gagnon

In November 2000, young people from throughout the Commonwealth took part in the "Millennium Youth Parliament". It took place over a three-day period in Manchester and featured many lively debates and exchanges of ideas. The following article was written by the Quebec delegate to the Youth Parliament.

One cannot return from such an experience without being affected by it in one way or another. The first memory that comes to mind is the vitality of the persons present.

Looking at the group photograph, I am still surprised that so many people from such distant horizons were able to come together for three days. I see Akima from Grenada, Aadilo from Manitoba, Linda from Zimbabwe and Naomi from Australia. I also notice Pascal from Kenya. I chuckle as I remember his admiration for Quebec superstar Céline Dion!

Many participants demonstrated an openness and a will to express themselves that make you want to do the same. There was no shortage of ideas, and the viewpoints were often well grounded.

When the participants rose to speak, they were spontaneous, amusing and surprising. Time was taken in preparing their comments which were both articulate and moving. I have still a vivid memory of the comments by Simone Donaghue of Australia, who taught us that a physical handicap is above all in the eye of the beholder. Her message has stayed with me: take interest first and foremost in the person behind the handicap. I also remember the spontaneity of the youngest participant in the Assembly, of the rightfulness of Paola's arguments and of Juan's sense of theatre.

The challenge of taking the floor before such an assembly is not the only one to be faced. The formulation of a motion by such a large number of people from such diverse origins is an achievement in itself. It is necessary to

come to an agreement, to share a common ideology. Meetings were lengthy and the discussions were sincere, as all had their hearts set on persuading their colleagues of the soundness of their ideas. And that is the main ingredient in a successful debate.

There are also personal challenges, such as preparing one's comments. One must weigh words and choose arguments carefully, because it is not often one has the attention of an audience that is so international and interested in similar issues. Approaching strangers to make their acquaintance is an ongoing challenge when one meets so many new people in such a short time. Such a gathering creates a mix of cultures, but also of characters! Indeed, it is an accelerated course in geography! I was also surprised that the level of English was so high, considering the diversity of origins of the participants, not all of whom are from English-speaking countries.

I was pleased to have met a few people there who were ready to engage in politics in their own way. My experience with parliamentary simulations taught me that all too often the participants reproduce politics as they perceive it, which focuses more on the interpretation of it than on participation. The sincerity of comments cannot be taken for granted. I have a penchant for idealists who are aware of their power to change the face of the world, and have the courage to think differently.

There was no shortage of bold ideas. Let us take the parties and their ideologies. Mine promised to eliminate the use of the automobile. The government wished to grant the right to vote from the age of 14, and the third party wished to abolish Parliament! All this leaves plenty of room for open minds that dare to put forward unusual suggestions.

Francis Gagnon attended the Commonwealth Youth Parliament as the delegate of the Quebec National Assembly.



The Millennium Youth Parliament took place in a studio in Manchester which recreated the atmosphere of the House of Commons at Westminster

We debated the decriminalization of soft drugs, as well as obligatory voting and free education. During these debates, I was also initiated to surprising and amusing parliamentary customs: for example the government was brought down in a parliamentary committee, and the Members had to express their vote by shouting!

These few memorable days went well, to a large extent because of the good preparation by the team of organizers. Here I wish to express my congratulations to An-

thony Staddon and to his team. They were not only good organizers, but also friendly and amenable hosts.

I am very proud to have represented the National Assembly at such an event. It was my first trip to England. I cannot conceal my appreciation for that country. Indeed as I write these lines, I am taking steps to study in London next year.