

CRO penalty not very sweet

Decision on pre-campaigning materials should apply to soft drink giant too



JESSICA WARREN

Just before Reading Week began, Students' Union Chief Returning Officer Rachel Woynorowski fined the No side of the upcoming Coke plebiscite \$900 of its \$1000 budget for "pre-campaigning," or campaigning before the designated period beginning on 26 February. Since February 15, one appeal and two complaints have been filed by students against the Yes side.

Tempers have flared on both sides; however it's clear from the wording of the appeal and the complaints made to the CRO that both sides of this debate are working with different definitions of who exactly is included in the No side, and what should be considered pre-campaigning material.

The first major confusion arose when the CRO first fined SAKCoke for violating SU Election policy by distributing what Woynorowski understood to be No-side literature. When this decision was made, neither SAKCoke nor any other group on campus had signed on officially to lead the No side campaign. While the CRO claims that "[a member] from SAKCoke indicated [their] intention to act as the campaign manager," once sides were officially registered, legally neither SAKCoke nor Stop Killer Coke International—the organizations whose materials

SAKCoke had been distributing for International Week—were responsible for the No campaign at the time of the CRO's ruling.

The CRO based her decision upon the fact that although SAKCoke had not signed on as representing the No side, their stickers could still be seen as material "calculated to convince members to vote in a given way." While this may be true, a sticker that directs students to the website for Stop Killer Coke International (whose materials were being used by the local SAKCoke group) and contains a phrase like "Dasani is Daphony," is certainly no more powerful a campaigning tool than a Coca-Cola vending machine, bottle or scoreboard that also advertises the company's website and directs students to "Drink! Coca Cola" among other slogans.

This double standard has only been worsened by the CRO's ruling on a complaint filed against Coke for pre-campaigning on these same grounds. The CRO stated that, as a business, Coke has a right "to operate in accordance with its normal course of business."

The favouring of a for-profit business over a not-for-profit one is striking and unfounded—charities and citizen groups shouldn't have to cease their public education programs altogether if an issue they address in their mandate becomes an election issue.

A complaint was also made against the Gateway, accusing the paper of pre-campaigning for the Yes side by running an opinion article siding with the CRO's original decision to fine the No campaign \$900. The CRO ruled against the complainant, citing the need for freedom of the press and the fact that

the author of the article wasn't a volunteer for either side of the campaign.

However, this complaint seems to be more concerned with pointing out the hypocrisy of the CRO's original ruling than any attempt to restrict the press' ability to cover current events. Based on Woynorowski's somewhat confused logic on this issue to date, an opinion article has as much connection to one side of a campaign as a student group's literature that was present on campus before the plebiscite question was ever approved.

There is a double standard being employed here: SAKCoke gets punished for distributing pre-campaigning materials, while the arguably more influential pre-campaigning activities of the rich and powerful Coca-Cola corporation are overlooked. While I'm not suggesting Coke should have been forced to take down or cover up any advertisements found on campus during reading week, the decision to fine SAKCoke 90 per cent of its budget based upon violations of SU election policy is unacceptably harsh given the CRO's own logic concerning this case.

The assumption on Woynorowski's part that SAKCoke's literature constitutes campaign propaganda while Coke's does not, along with her protection of for-profit business rights over not-for-profit ones, has left the No side with barely enough money to fund its efforts for the remainder of the pre-election period.

This unfortunately will mean that students won't be given all sides of the story concerning the Coke contract, and the debate around its benefits and injuries done to students by its extension will remain unsatisfactory.

Students can't afford to pass this up



ROSS PRUSAKOWSKI

Given all of the attention and controversy that the plebiscite question on extending the exclusivity contract with Coca-Cola has received, it's been easy to overlook the other, more important question on the ballot facing students this year. Unlike the non-binding Coke plebiscite, whose results the Students' Union and the University can—and likely will—ignore if students don't support a contract extension, the results of the referendum on the Universal Bus Pass (U-Pass) proposal will have important ramifications for all students.

The results of the vote on the U-Pass referendum will legally require the University and SU to add a few more dollars to the cost of a University of Alberta education—at least for some people. However, unlike the annual tuition hikes, where more money is siphoned from students who get little or nothing tangible in return for the increases, the U-Pass fee will provide something concrete and useful for all students. The proposed pass, which calls for a mandatory fee of \$75 per student per term, will provide all students not eligible for the limited opt-out with an all-encompassing transit pass.

For those student who rely on public transit to get to campus, supporting this

proposal should be a given. For only a fraction of the cost (\$150 versus \$432 for eight months annually, with savings of \$1128 over a the course of a four-year degree), students will be able to save for other university necessities like tuition, books and food. Beyond the simple monetary savings, students will also no longer have the hassle of having to stand in line to buy a monthly pass or ticket book.

Despite what people living on and around campus may say, if the U-Pass is approved in the election, they'll use the pass.

While it's easy to assume that only students who currently use transit will benefit the most from the U-Pass, adopting that point of view is too narrow and misses many of the U-Pass' benefits as experienced at other universities. At least a dozen other postsecondary institutions in Canada have worked U-Pass deals over the last decade, but one need only look at the University of British Columbia's experience—an institution of comparable size to the U of A—to debunk issues raised by non-transit-users.

In a 2005 study reviewing the effects of the UBC U-Pass, which was introduced in 2003, it was found that a year and half after the pass' introduction, 81 per cent of all students had used

their U-Pass. Therefore, despite what people living on and around campus may say, if the U-Pass is approved in the election, they'll use the pass. While this should be apparent to anyone familiar with the "if you build it, they will come" school of business, one should only expect use to be even higher at the U of A for the simple fact that while walking or riding your bike during Vancouver's wet-but-warm winters is a viable option, only the hardiest of souls try it in Edmonton.

The same study also outlined a host of benefits offered by the U-Pass beyond providing students with a cheaper bus pass. Overall transit ridership at UBC increased by 63 per cent in just two years, leading in turn to an increase in overall transit capacity; students reported savings of between \$160 – \$800 per year because of the access the U-Pass gave them for living and shopping locations; traffic around campus decreased; and demand for campus parking declined. All of these benefits have been seen at other schools, including the Universities of Calgary and Simon Fraser, so it's safe to assume that the U of A would see similar benefits.

Given the size of the student body, it's impossible to develop a plan or fee that works perfectly for every single student. Yet, while the U-Pass isn't perfect, after almost a decade of talk, false starts and one previous attempt, the U-Pass is finally on the verge of moving from Students' Union fantasy to student reality—a move that's long overdue and which should be embraced by all students.

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