

The confessions of a student spin doctor

Forget the straight-laced general election. **Dan Searle**, chief campus spin doctor for gracious loser Henry Sauntson gives us the real scoop on the dirty world of Students' Union politics. Who cares about winning, coming third has never been so much fun

If I were to claim that Henry Sauntson's campaign to become SU President began as nothing more than the idle amusement foxtrot of two workless English undergraduates, it might, given our subsequent failure, smack resoundingly of sour grapes. It is fair to say, though, that recalling the maxim that nobody remembers the guy who finishes second, we initially set out to avoid such a dishonour, by finishing third. However, as soon as we contracted election fever via the proboscis of the mosquito of potential victory, these sour grapes sweetened in our mouths and became very much the grapes of electoral wrath. Suddenly, what had appeared on the ultrasound to be a perfectly healthy pastime had gestated into an obsession, soon to burst out of our womb, scuttle into the ventilation shafts, and return, now a monster or a god, to destroy us. We began by buying some felt-tip pens.

Following a rendezvous and an egg baguette, our merciless propaganda was designed and all but ready to go to print. The felt-tips had, with our help, created an uncannily accurate replica of Henry's face, which became emblazoned with a devastatingly clever slogan: "Henry for SU President". Our little media Reich was completed by a series of smaller flyers. Some bore mottos and watchwords, such as "Henry: Not just a Hoover", "Henry: Caress me with your vote", "Henry: I will cure you", and "Henry = Good". A set of four were laden with policies, each one a personal dream of Sauntson, harboured since his passionate embrace with York University began. Yes! There would be a 24-hour library. Yes! There would be a cash point in Halifax. Yes! There would be a pharmacy on campus, and the bars would be made a bit better! Yes! Yes! YES! I can still vividly remember this moment, watching Henry recite these reveries with fists held high, voice wavering with emotion, and eyes tightly clenched, as these campus-improving fantasies became, just for a moment, reality. His eyes opened and a solitary tear trickled down one face; he had just witnessed the potential nirvana he was to dub 'Sauntopia'. We decided that the only way in which we could express how much these four cradled delights meant to Henry was to make each set of the four flyers exchangeable for a signed photo.

Equipped with a bundle of brightly coloured flyers, a few brightly coloured posters, and some disappointingly monochrome bluetack, we began, just over a week before the election, to daub campus with visual persuasion. We had no Mayflower in which to travel, and we were but one of many vying to proselytise these polytheistic heretics, but, by gosh, we had enthusiasm, spirit, and far too much spare time. Our first setback came with a warning from the SU

How to run an unsuccessful campaign

Mr. Searle generously reveals his pearls of wisdom on the art of campaigning. It's a fail-safe strategy for a convincing and mildly embarrassing defeat, personally tried and tested to great effect by the Tories. Just remember; nice guys finish third.

Make use of crayola pens

The essential ingredients for a sophisticated and mature media campaign. The Early Learning Centre has never been so useful for wanabee politicians.

Keep slogans simple

Optimise generic, monosyllabic slogans during the campaign. Forget the long words, the proletariat are just too ignorant to understand.

Services Officer Verity Radley, who informed us that we weren't allowed to unfurl our banners in the Derwent toilets, as we had done, until the following day. We didn't enquire as to how she'd found them, but, with the sound of wrist slapping now accompanying our quest to erect our flags, our determination hardened, poised at any moment to erupt in a shower of fluid campaigning. Following the distribution of our handicraft, Henry was invited to record a sixty second bout of integrity for YSTV, in which he could explain his agenda; this useful promotional medium was then broadcast, completely silently, to a rapt proletariat.

The final week arrived, and with it the luscious stench of democratic approval; it wafted; and as it did so, our eyes became large, and the light that it shone could be seen. Our tactics took a decidedly unsavoury downturn. Henry chose to conclude his URY interview with *Wired For Sound* by Cliff Richard, a song notorious for its Wagnerian ability to instil political doctrines into agnostic prey. Drunken chinwagging with the current SU President took place in Toffs, while paparazzi swarmed around. Most underhand of all was a Machiavellian ruse which was never allowed to rear its shameful arse in public. Noting that the main poster of one of the candidates featured both a lengthy spiel, and a quasi-sexual photo, we rustled up a few lines of literature, printed it out several times in the corresponding size and font, and were fully prepared to make a late-night visit to campus, and doctor the posters with our own, glued-on manifesto.

Make ambitious promises

Go crazy with promises that you can't possibly deliver. Who cares if you are lying, you can always do a Stalin and purge the critics who don't appreciate your electioneering.

Break rules and regulations

Rules are meant to be broken - it's only the SU, treat it as a practice experiment before you go into real politics, where people actually care. Corruption, collusion and bribery are your chief weapons of mass destruction.

Remember sex sells

That picture of you licking your ballot paper, might not be a conventional political portrait, but the public will love it. All photos must seep with sexual innuendos.

We were prevented, however, by the fag-end of a collective conscience which we retained at this point. In retrospect, Henry commented "I wish I'd had the balls to go through with it, because it would've been very funny" - such is the effect of political machinations on a hitherto innocent mind.

And so the Thursday and Friday of the elections came to be. Several hours were spent patrolling campus, and several texts were sent, encouraging those whom we knew, and those whom we didn't, to spare a vote for Henry. Friday saw a last-gasp campaign charge in Halifax; having identified it as the swing college, we had already directed much of our attention to making its members feel like we, or, in fact, anybody else on campus, cared even remotely about the welfare of their odd little residential outcrop, and had decided to spend the concluding moments of the election there, harvesting any additional votes that we could. However, due to an administrative error, Halifax was breached with around ten minutes, rather than an hour and ten minutes, remaining, and Henry's tally was increased by a rather disappointing total of three. And what of the signed photos? Well. They went very much like hot cakes in an uncomfortably warm diabetics ward, with a mere handful being presented to merry punters clutching their set of leaflets, and one or two being dispensed to damned chancers who wanted one without having collected the necessary bartering tools.

Results night arrived, and, undeterred by a

YSTV exit poll having placed Henry third, we strode into Derwent carrying sizeable ambitions, as well as a bag full of beverages. We collected our wristbands and immediately relocated with our entourage to a quiet corridor in the Politics department above Derwent. How ironic, we mused, that we should be drinking our cheap alcohol in the Politics department, when we ourselves were involved in politics at that very moment. Then we found a male toilet with no urinals, and this state of perfection was broken.

Steady alcohol consumption somewhat hijacked a YSTV interview, with myself claiming that I was, in fact, called 'Sad Burglar', and then letting fly a series of obscenities which I can only assign to an insatiable hunger for political success. The general inebriation also increased the expectation of emerging victorious to levels previously regarded as "well stupid", but these were, fortunately, defused early in the evening, when Henry was invited to witness the vote count, and discovered that he would not, in fact, be appearing on SU coins next year. What he himself described as "an illicit hope that I might win" had been tragically killed, but we considered the final tally, of around two hundred votes, as a relative success for a candidate with no experience and a campaign based around childlike drawings.

The result was also super for other reasons; to increase our chances of a victory legitimising our copious alcohol intake and over-enthusiastic outfits, we'd placed our loyalties on an 'each way' bet, with Henry our first choice of president, and the eventual winner second, on the basis that he's on our English course and he's nice. We felt, perhaps misguidedly, that our efforts had, in some small way, confused the voting public into believing Henry was, in fact, anything other than an entirely ridiculous choice, and aided the future president en route to his victory. There is, perhaps, a sense that one of the candidates was frustrated by our campaign, and saw it as unnecessarily detrimental to his own, but then, not everyone can be the winner.

And so more alcohol was consumed, and the night proved a fitting conclusion to an excursion which Henry himself described as "rock shit."

Henry proves that he's still the main man on campus, despite his electoral defeat at the end of last term.
Photo by Toby Hall