

How The UUA Manufactures Consent

Our Unitarian Universalist Association adopted a new form of governance in 2010 that has vested power in the hands of a small, self-selected group of insiders who now exercise control of the denomination by the manufacture of consent.

Let's unpack that alarming claim.

I: The Shift To Policy Governance

Up until 2010, the UUA Board was elected geographically, with representatives from each of 23 districts. This made for a large and sometimes unwieldy deliberative body. On one hand, it meant that the average person in the pew might actually know their elected Trustee (as many in my Burlington congregation knew Rev. Will Saunders, our Vermont/New Hampshire Trustee, because even though Will was in New Hampshire his mother Miriam was a member of the church I served in a neighboring state). There was more local control, but this also meant that many Trustees looked like their constituents. Vermont and New Hampshire are overwhelmingly white, and our Trustee, Rev. Saunders, was also white.

In order to bring more racial and gender diversity to the UUA Board, and to streamline its cumbersome decision-making, the General Assembly in 2010 voted to move to Policy Governance. I believe I voted in favor of the change. It sounded like a good idea at the time.

As a result, the size of the Board was cut in half, with two youth representatives (again to bring diversity to the mix), while the President, Moderator, and Financial Advisor were made *ex officio* members, without vote. The members of the Board were no longer elected locally. Instead, they were named by the Nominating Committee, subject to confirmation by the General Assembly. How did that work out?

II: Good Intentions Gone Awry

The switch to policy governance ended by making our Association less democratic, less diverse and more centrally controlled.

Members of the Board were to be selected by the Nominating Committee with special regard to including “historically marginalized communities” and other factors to guarantee a true cross-section of the multicultural faith we aspired to be. And who

selected the Nominating Committee? The Nominating Committee itself. Power was vested in the hands of insiders. No votes or ballots (much less secret ballots) were required for the General Assembly delegates to confirm these appointments. As long as there were no pesky “nominees by petition” (and petitioning to get on the ballot was an arduous, expensive and time-consuming process, about as likely to succeed as running as a third party candidate for President of the United States) both Board and Nominating Committee members assumed their wins by acclamation. Their ascension became part of the consent agenda. One member of the Nominating Committee I spoke with told me that never had there been a nominee by petition or any successful outsider challenge to this powerful, self-appointed body of insiders.

Imagine a City Council or U.S. Congressional contest with just one nominee and no other contestants. Would we call that democracy? Or something else?

III: UU Evolves Into Unctious Uniformitarianism

Naturally people on the Nominating Committee want to replace outgoing members with others who share their viewpoints and agendas. It's only human nature. Friends gravitate toward friends. Like is attracted to like. So while the Nominating Committee and Board became more inclusive in terms of race, sexual orientation, and gender, they both became more homogenous, more uniform, in their ideologies and priorities.

Meanwhile, the Board became much more powerful. For example, the Board was able to transfer a quarter of the denomination's unrestricted endowment to Black Lives of UU without either the President's or Financial Advisor's presence or input. When these kinds of unilateral actions created tension, as we saw in 2016, the Board was able to engineer the ouster of an elected President and several other UUA staff. The Board knew it had the stronger hand. Other players had to fold their cards.

IV The Manufacture of Consent

How can the Board act with such impunity? Doesn't the General Assembly hold the real power in our denomination? No, the Nominating Committee and their pals on the Board prevail through the manufacture of consent.

- General Assembly is largely a spectacle where delegates wave their yellow ballots on cue. Delegates pay attention to the resolutions of Social Witness, where there is always heated debate but not much happens, and they take interest in the Presidential races, even though the President has become a

largely ceremonial figurehead to bless the Board's decisions. Other business items almost always pass in a blur of Robert's Rules that baffle the average lay person.

- Consent is manufactured by alienating the opposition. In 2010, Peter Morales defeated Laurel Hallman by a margin of 2,061 to 1,481 votes. In other words, 3,542 delegates were present in Minneapolis. According to the General Assembly credentials report from 2016, after Morales' negotiated resignation, there were 1,842 delegates present in Columbus, about half the number that participated in his election. Absentee, online voting, although a good idea, doesn't begin to make up the difference. It may sound Machiavellian, but you can whip your opponents simply by encouraging them to drop out of the process.
- The UUA Board appoints over two-thirds of the members of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Seminarians and smart young clergy in preliminary fellowship know they must pass a litmus test to receive their punch card to practice ministry. Consciously or unconsciously, they understand they must not rock the boat. I am not saying that any knowingly compromise their principles. I am saying that, when your paycheck depends on it, principles seem more flexible. (One older graduate of Starr King I know well was given a Category 4 and told to seek mental health counseling because he told the MFC that while he saw racism as a pressing moral concern, he believed that climate change posed an event greater threat to the future of the planet) Clergy not only vote at GA, they have tremendous sway with their congregants. By weeding out outliers, the Board grooms the next generation of trusted functionaries to serve on its endless committees and run the bureaucracy.
- The Board manufactures consent by encouraging purges, censures and denunciations of clergy who fail to pay deference to their decrees, through the propaganda of its house organ the *UU World*, and by the manipulation of myths and memes that identify the current generation of thought police with the freethinkers and bold minds of an heroic past.

So what if even half of this true?

V: Conclusion

The things I am saying are not nice, but I want to be clear that I am not attacking anyone on the UUA Board or Nominating Committee personally. Since Dick Jackie

died, I'm not sure I know any of the current members and they are probably wonderful individuals who love their dogs, work at the soup kitchen, recycle and floss. My critique is not directed at individuals, rather at a system. I think policy governance has led us down a road where our religious leadership

- Is increasingly self-selecting and ingrown
- Is less accountable to the rank and file
- Is less transparent in its operations
- Is less diverse and tolerates less diversity of opinion in our movement

When given unchecked authority, automatic ascent to electoral victory, and the power to judge, punish, and control the livelihoods of others who stand in their way, while cloaking themselves in a mantle of moral purity, even the best human beings succumb to their worst instincts. This is why I believe my original statement to be true, even if alarming:

Our Unitarian Universalist Association adopted a new form of governance in 2010 that has vested power in the hands of a small, self-selected group of insiders who now exercise control of the denomination by the manufacture of consent.

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