

Referendum question questioned

by Jim Kelly

I was rather disturbed by something I read in the Nov. 9 issue of the *Lance*. In this issue there was an article titled "One Million Referendums" which discussed, in part, the planned SAC referendum on the abortion issue. It was not the article which disturbed me (sorry, Ted), but rather the wording of the proposed referendum question as reported in the article.

Being a graduate student in Communication Studies, I have designed and implemented several survey questionnaires, and I must tell you that if the wording of this referendum question is designed to confuse, those responsible for its design have really outdone themselves.

As found in this article, the question reads: "Are you in favour of SAC taking a position in support of the movement to prevent the recriminalization of abortion in Canada, allowing women the continued right to reproductive choice? Yes or No."

If you found it necessary to re-read this question a few times, don't worry, you're not alone. I've shown this question to several other people whom I consider to be quite intelligent (even some professors), and their unanimous reaction was, "Whaaat???"

There are several reasons why this question is so confusing.

First of all, look at the active verbs found in the question. These take the reader through so many conflicting positions that we don't know what we're responding 'yes or no' to. Are we "favouring"; "supporting"; "preventing"; "recriminalizing"; "allowing"...? In other words, the question lacks a consistent direction. It's almost like

asking, "Do you support the prevention of allowing the recriminalization of abortion?" See what I mean?

Secondly, aside from being extremely confusing, the question is skewed toward a positive response. One of the golden rules of question design is not to present questions in such a way that they are likely to predispose the respondents to answer with one given alternative over the other. People, by nature, prefer to affiliate themselves with positive rather than negative actions (which is why we have 'Pro-life' and 'Pro-choice' supporters and not 'anti-abortionists'). Therefore, by asking people if they are in favour of "allowing women the continued right to reproductive choice," this question will more than likely result in more 'Yes' responses than 'No' responses simply due to the very nature of the question and how it is posed. After all, who am I to 'disallow' women this right?

Moreover, the very existence of a "right" to reproductive choice is one of the

main points of contention between both sides of this debate. It should not be presented in this question as an existing, self-evident right, since this appears to present a 'Pro-choice' bias.

Therefore a much simplified and more neutrally-worded question must be found. For example, something such as the following: "Should SAC take a position against the recriminalization of abortion in Canada? Yes or No."

Unfortunately, this simplified version still displays a couple of problems, not the least of which is a serious lack of interpretability. For instance, how is a 'No' response to be interpreted? Does it mean 'No' to SAC adopting a Pro-choice position, or 'No' to SAC taking a position at all? Perhaps it would be desirable for the referendum question to make this distinction, in which case it could be presented in two parts -- the first part asking, "Should [SAC] take a position to take. If this distinction is not to be made, then the phrase "take a position

against" should be replaced by the single word "oppose," which is equivalent in meaning and less ambiguous. Also, a more neutral alternative could be found for the loaded word "recriminalization."

As we all know, the abortion issue is an extremely contentious and divisive one. Whether or not this referendum should be held on the University of Windsor campus is an issue in itself. But, if and when it is held, it is SAC's obligation and duty to ensure that it is measuring the pulse of student opinion on this campus as accurately as possible.

If left in its present form, the proposed referendum question will only result in a distorted perception of student opinion on this controversial issue, and will clearly represent both an abrogation of the democratic process which it is designed to serve, and a serious disservice to the students on this campus who care enough to become part of the process. □

Printing error

The Women's Centre

Birth control is fundamental to our effort to understand our bodies, control our health care, and have autonomy in our lives. In the U.S., women rose to the issue of birth control in the early twentieth century primarily in an effort to increase our reproductive freedom through greater access to contraceptives. Today we have numerous contraceptive methods, yet many of us are dissatisfied with the choices facing us, and we still get pregnant when we don't plan to. Worrying about pregnancy can prevent us from enjoying sexual intercourse with fertile men. We may dream of a contraceptive which is perfectly safe, 100% effective, easy to use, instantly re-

versible and free. Yet controlling birth involves more than having the "right" methods and techniques. Even with them, our decision to use birth control involves our feelings about ourselves, our sexuality and our relationships. Real reproductive freedom depends on having the personal, social, and political power to choose freely whether or not to have children." (Bell 1984)

On Nov. 27 and 28, 1989, a referendum will be held on campus asking students to vote on a fee increase with regard to the drug plan. The women's centre is particularly concerned with the question of whether or not oral contraceptives will be

covered. Currently, the birth control pill is not covered by our drug plan, and there is no adequate explanation why this is so.

This referendum is about a fee increase which in itself is not a women's issue. Neither is this a women's issue because only women are prescribed oral contraceptives. This issue which concerns women stems from the fact that a drug prescribed only to women is also the *only* drug excluded from the drug plan coverage.

We urge that all men and women on campus take a stand to ensure that oral contraceptives, which are prescription drugs, be treated as such. □

Julie Lawson