

# WINGING IT:

## NDP Youth Reach For The Top In Ottawa

BY SHEYFALII SAVJANI AND CAROLYN ADOLPH

It was the most harmonious political convention the Ottawa Civic Centre had seen in years. There was no leadership race, no backstabbing, nothing but caucus after good-natured caucus.

Some observers called the New Democratic Party's June policy convention a 'love in'. Most called it boring. Without the drama of the Conservative and Liberal conventions' leadership struggles, the NDP's convention was largely ignored by the media.

But a struggle was in progress, a struggle by one wing of the party to regain its former status as a legitimate force in determining policy — the NDP Youth. But youth could not return from oblivion in the NDP as easily as they had hoped.

Young NDP delegates came to the convention determined to elect a youth representative to the party's eight-member national executive. Their failure to put their candidate — Raymond Guardia — on the executive underlines a painful reality: NDP structure is designed to include its youth at the highest level, but party establishment is not ready to accept them.

The decision to run Guardia was a ploy by the youth caucus to gain power on a party executive which has largely ignored their concerns for the last decade. The caucus felt that youth issues were not receiving a fair hearing in the party.

By rejecting the traditional process and running a candidate against the slate approved by party establishment, they would upset careful negotiations by other groups within the party to get on the executive. Perhaps by proving that they could do so and then decide not to, the youth caucus may have made greater gains than they would have by flouting party unity altogether.

Andrew McNeill, president of the Young NDP in Ontario, says the youth delegates came to the convention wanting recognition of both youth issues and youth themselves. They felt they have been alienated by the establishment, and there is some evidence to suggest they are right.

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One incident, particularly infuriating to youth delegates, was a budget meeting held before the convention. A youth proposal for a mere \$7,000 was debated for over an hour and finally rejected. Many youth delegates felt this was only a drop in the bucket when the total budget for the party is a quarter million dollars.

That kind of disregard for youth con-

cerns is what prompted the youth caucus to run a candidate in the convention's national vice-presidents election.

There was a certain element of daring in this decision. Their candidate ran alone against the slate of eight vice-presidential candidates who had already been recommended by the nominating committee and the party establishment.

If successful, a youth vice-president could have upset the slate and proven that youth could and would exercise all the power they had.

But how much is that? McNeill says the NDP constitution does not exclude a youth candidate from the possibility of gaining any party office, including the Federal Council and the national executive. That is because the Youth caucus is a subset of the party rather than a separate wing. "I could run for leader if I wanted to," he says.

Guardia's bid for a seat on the executive endangered only half of the establishment slate — the male half. The NDP's devotion to regional and gender parity is well entrenched in the structure of the Federal Council. The eight positions on the executive slate were divided evenly between men and women. Power is also shared out among the regions. This is designed to ensure that less-populous regions (which lack the voting power of numerous delegates on the convention floor) still have representation at the executive level.

Among the four men on the approved slate was Richard Cashin, who would represent the Atlantic region on the Federal Council. He was the weakest candidate on the slate, with only 50 delegates (out of a total of 2,000 at the convention) from the Atlantic sure to support him. If popular sympathy went to Guardia, which seemed very likely, Cashin would be the candidate most likely to lose out.

And there was another complication. Nova Scotia NDP leader Alexa McDonough says Newfoundland had already agreed to forgo any position on the Federal Council, as long as there was at least one vice-presidential candidate for the Atlantic region. If Cashin lost to the youth candidate, Newfoundland would have no voice at all on the Federal Council.

When confronted by McDonough, the

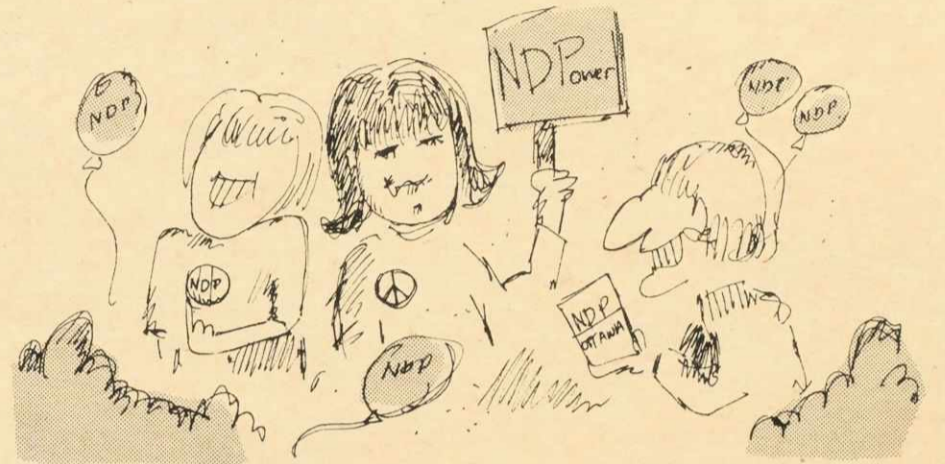


Illustration by Stephen Thrasher

youth caucus denied Cashin was being targeted.

This led delegates to wonder who would be targeted by the youth caucus. It stood to reason, said Scott Peters, youth delegate from B.C., that someone was going to lose to the youth candidate.

The most likely candidate was Kealy Cummings, a labour representative from Ontario. Since Ontario already had two voices on Council, in leader Ed Broadbent and acclaimed president Marion Dewar, why give it two more representatives? And why should labour have two? There was room in the Council for the Youth candidate; the trick was finding the place to get in.

But labour would not make room for a youth candidate. Peters, after scouting the floor to gauge reaction, came to a hasty youth strategy session looking worried. "The movers and the shakers" in labour, he reported, would be so annoyed by the loss of either of their seats that they would block all other youth motions before the floor, including the cherished resolution to create a federal youth section.

It appeared that the only way out was to back down. A full youth caucus like the one that voted to run Guardia in the first place, would have to be called.

That caucus was attended by over 100 delegates, 65 more than showed up at the caucus that nominated Guardia. There they heard Guardia's campaign manager, David Scholzen, raise the question of his candidate's credibility. "Who would it impress that our candidate announced candidacy before 900 delegates, was warmly applauded, and now we're going to withdraw him?"

Others claimed that the point of the maneuver was not to impress anyone, but to get representation within the party. If they could be assured of getting a constitutional amendment creating a federal youth section by backing down on the demand for a vice-president, then they would have made a significant gain. The 'loss of face' would not be so damaging a blow to the caucus' integrity that it could not continue to lobby for a vice-presidential post.

The watchword seemed to be 'compromise'. The party would not yet allow youth into its inner circle: that message was quite

clear. To force the issue might be to lose the chance to move past the NDP's provincial-level organization to the federal level.

After the vote, which barely defeated the idea of running a candidate by 42 to 39, there was a mix of relief and disappointment. Many rose to speak in support of Guardia, whose character and ability, they assured him and each other, had nothing to do with the decision not to run.

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Had it been a defeat or a victory? It certainly left the youth caucus divided, but not irreparably.

Peters said the youth delegates had come to the convention in disarray. United in the desire for more power in the party, they were unfortunately not quite well-organized enough to get onto the approved slate before the convention when, says Peters, negotiations should have taken place.

Even Scholzen, whose adamant support of a move against the slate annoyed some delegates, admitted to changing his position. "My only fear was that we'd be interpreted as being uncertain and not sure what we wanted to do. In fact it (withdrawing the youth candidate) was appreciated by most of the party. The earlier decision was more complicated than we realized. People understood that it wouldn't please a lot of people, but the complexity of how it wouldn't please people, that we didn't realize."

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