

## Agent Orange case shows need for Freedom of Information legislation

The recent revelation that the U.S. army has tested chemical defoliants near CFB Gagetown has raised tremendous ire from both environmentalists and the political opposition. We haven't heard such a load uproar about an environmental issue since the Three-Mile Island accident, and rightly so. It is certainly disturbing to find out that Canadians have been so nonchalantly served up as convenient Guinea pigs for the testing of military defoliants. However, behind all the fuss and commotion that is being raised right now about the tests, there lies a more basic issue — the need for effective freedom of information legislation in this country.

What is far more disturbing than the New Brunswick Guinea pigs near Gagetown is the startling realization that it took us fifteen (yes, count them, fifteen) years to find out that the tests occurred.

The amazing ability of the Defence Minister, Gilles Lamontagne, to keep the knowledge of the tests to himself for five months after being informed of them is indicative of the unhealthy attitude towards confidentiality of information that exists in the government today. Not even Lamontagne's fellow ministers knew about the tests — Trudeau had to ask for the question to be repeated in the House of Commons Friday because he couldn't understand it. Not even Health Minister Monique Begin was informed because, in Lamontagne's own words, he was told there was nothing to worry about. Certainly the only reason the NDP defence critic found out about it because of research done in the U.S. by the Church of Scientology, using the Freedom of Information Act.

George Ferguson, editor of the Montreal Star, summed up the concept of freedom of information in the introduction to a series of lectures given at Queen's University in 1955.

"It is that every man and woman will be better off if the transmission and reception of fact and opinion are left free from the intention of government."

In Ferguson's case, he was referring to the hard-won freedom of the press to criticize. However, today the modern problem is not to end suppression of facts already known, but the opening of avenues

to obtain information which may not even be suspected to exist.

The existence of large data banks containing information of vital financial or other importance to an individual without his knowledge is a recent issue which raises the spectre of 1984. In Canada, our legislation has taken the first steps to combat the "filing-system society" by requiring that the locations and contents of data-banks be published. However, what is needed now is the application of this principle one step further.

All government information should be available to the public unless it can be shown that the material concerned is of paramount importance to national security. We need legislation, legal processes, and a body of precedents to establish this idea, or else the next Agent Orange test may be one that we will never find out about.

In Nova Scotia, a reporter from any of the media can still be faced by a blank wall when he is after material the government doesn't want to release. The papers and video media fought a tremendous legal battle in order to win the right to examine writs issued to the RCMP. After they were finished, they didn't even end up with material that was embarrassing to the government. Can you imagine how much harder it would have been to uncover material that the MLA's would have a genuine self-interest in keeping hidden? Certainly there's no chance of getting any of the results of the RCMP investigation into Rollie-gate published, not legally anyway. Rollie's suing CFDR for broadcasting what little they knew of the affair through the constricted and serendipitous channels of tips, leads, and "investigative reporting".

In the United States, nearly 100 Michigan veterans of the Vietnam war joined a nation wide class action suit against the makers of Agent Orange. Shortly, the medical data about residents in New Brunswick will have been sifted to determine the dangers they have been exposed to. The residents near Gagetown may or may not join the class action suit, and they may or may not have been exposed to real dangers. But the terrible risk of worse dangers will still exist until we have a way to make the government tell its population what is really going on.



NEWS ITEM: IN 1967 THE U.S. GOVT TESTED A DANGEROUS CHEMICAL IN NEW BRUNSWICK.

## the Dalhousie Gazette

The Dalhousie Gazette, Canada's oldest college newspaper, is the weekly publication of the Dalhousie Student Union members, and is a founding member of Canadian University Press.

The views expressed in the Dalhousie Gazette are not necessarily those of the Dalhousie Student Union, the editor, or the collective staff. We reserve the right to edit material for reasons of space, legality, grammar or good taste.

The deadline for articles and letters-to-the-editor is noon on Monday. No unsigned material will be accepted, but anonymity may be granted on request. Letters should not exceed 500 words and must be typed on a 64-character line and double spaced.

Local Advertising is handled by DAL-ADS—the advertising department of Dalhousie Student Union: Tel. 424-6532. Ad copy must be submitted by the Friday preceding publication.

Our office is located on the third floor of the Dalhousie Student Union Building. Our mailing address is the Dalhousie Gazette, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N.S. You can reach us by telephone at (902) 424-2507.

The subscription rate is \$10. per year (26 issues) and our ISSN number is 0011-5819.

Editor: Paul Clark

News Editor: Paul Creelman

Production Manager: Maura Green

Entertainment Editor: Glenn Walton

Sports Editor: Sandy Smith

Features Editor:

Copy Editors: Deirdre Dwyer and Marlene Peinsznski

CUP Editor: Nancy Ross

Photo Editor: Chris Hartt

Office Manager: Arnold Mosher

Circulation Manager: Joe Wilson

Advertising and Business Manager: Sandy MacDonald Tel. 424-6532

Graphics Editor: Paul Withers

Staff Members: Greg Dennis, Frank McGinn, John Cairns, S.J. Hayes, Bruce Rae, Gisele Marie Baxter, Andrew Sinclair, Alan Christensen, Judy Pelham, Cathy McDonald, Michael McCarthy, Elaine Frampton, Paul Withers, Martin Sullivan, Flora MacLeod, Ian Holloway, Sylvia Kaptein, Maura Green, Peter McDonald, Ken Fogarty, Elliott Richman, Jenn MacLeod, Margaret Little, Mike Marshall, Gretchen Pohlkamp, Chris Young, P.J. McManus, Kim Marchant, John Dobbs and Pina DiPierro.

**The Dalhousie Gazette Publishing Society will be meeting Monday evening at 8 o'clock in room 424 of the SUB. All members of the university community are welcome to attend.**