

Francis supports Liberal party on television

SMU student leader appears in campaign ad

BY ANDREW SIMPSON

With a provincial election on the way, Nova Scotia television viewers can expect to see political advertising on their screens, but some Saint Mary's University students were surprised to see their student union president in a Liberal campaign commercial.

Saint Mary's University Student Association (SMUSA) president John Francis has appeared in an ad in support of the Liberal Party of Nova Scotia.

The ad features brief, unrehearsed person-on-the-street interviews.

"I'm not exactly sure what he says [in the ad], but it was something to the effect that things are starting to turn around for the Liberal party," said David Harrigan, Liberal campaign spokesperson.

The ad has been running on local television for just under a week and is part of the Liberal media campaign leading up to the Mar. 24 election.

Francis' part in the campaign has angered many students who say a student union leader should not take a public stance in favour of a political party.

"University politics and student politics should be separate," said Cheryl Konoff, a third-year student at Saint Mary's.

"[Francis] should be out fighting them, not supporting them... what a slap in the face."

As student union president, Francis serves as a representative of all Saint Mary's students. And by appearing in the commercial, some say their representative has been co-opted by the Liberal party.

But Harrigan says the commercial's producers were unaware of Francis' position.

"We had no idea he was a student, let alone a student union president," Harrigan said.

No one is questioning Francis' right to a personal opinion, just whether he should have shared it.

"Morally, he shouldn't have voiced an opinion," said Brad MacDonald, another third-year student, "his job is to represent people who have a wide range of opinions and beliefs and he's really not doing his job if he does voice partisan beliefs."

"All students have different political beliefs," says Chris Adams, Dalhousie Student Union president, "in order to do our jobs properly we have to be open to all those different ideas."

Paul Black, Acadia Student Union president, says student leaders must step carefully when speaking their mind.

"John [Francis] has got his political stripe and he's following his political stripe," Black said. "I just hope he's following it for the right reasons."

"We'll graduate with a \$30,000 debt while that bozo is getting a free ride"

Graduate student J.F. Beauchesne says Francis should have remained neutral.

"I wonder how much money he got for doing that?" Beauchesne asked. "We'll graduate with a \$30,000 debt while that bozo is getting a free ride."

But Francis defends his right to speak his mind. He says he was not paid for his appearance and is not a member of the Liberal party.

"When I did it, it was just as John Francis. [The Liberal television crew] were there on campus asking students for their opinion.

"They asked for my opinion

about the issues that are important to my constituency. It makes no sense if I can't give my opinion on the issues."

Jessica Squires is the national executive representative for the Nova Scotia component of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS). Squires says that student leaders throwing their support behind one party is risky.

"It has to be weighed carefully," she said, "if you take a partisan stance and the party you support doesn't get elected, then there is a danger that your issues won't get addressed."

The Canadian Alliance of Students Associations (CASA) does not operate on a provincial level, but CASA's Atlantic director, Kevin Lacey, agreed that there is a risk to choosing sides in an election.

"Each party is trying to find solutions," he said, "and if they see you're partisan then immediately all your ideas become tainted."

But Francis says the Liberals are the only party to have asked him what he thought and, should he be approached by either the NDP or the PCs, he would be happy to compliment policies of their's which he supports. However, he did reiterate his

support for the Liberals.

"In the last few years the Liberal party is the only one that gave a damn about education issues," Francis said.

But there are also those who have a problem with who Francis chose to support, and among them is Acadia's Paul Black.

"There has been a lot of talk [by the Liberals] about student debt. I have yet to see concrete measures that address student debt in a real way," Black said. "They have also perpetuated the funding cuts to institutions and have placed universities in a position to either jack tuition and decrease accessibility or cut programs and force Nova Scotia students to go elsewhere."

Some students, however, say they could hardly care less what Francis said, and who he supported.

"If it doesn't affect the image he's supposed to represent of the school and doesn't affect his job, then it's okay," said second-year student, Stephanie Bigg.

"It doesn't bother me," said third-year student, Tanya Wagner. "It won't affect the way I'm going to vote, just because he was in the commercial."

"It might affect someone who really respects him in his position, but not me."

Faculty e-mail comes under fire

BY KAVERI GUPTA AND SHELLEY ROBINSON

The faculty association is trying to take their side of the story directly to students — and is facing accusations of underhandedness as a result.

The association wrote a letter summarizing what the faculty considers the important points of both settled and unsettled issues in the contract negotiations. They are awaiting a mass departmental e-mail list before sending it out. The association wrote the letter in an attempt to inform students of their position on the negotiations.

Mass e-mails are against the university computer information code, unless people have requested the information.

Dalhousie Faculty Association president Ismet Ugursal says the letter is an attempt to convey both what has happened so far, and the faculty's position.

"We are not trying to convince anyone, we are trying to present a perspective. [Students] will look at the perspective, they will look at the facts and they will

make up their own minds," he said.

But some say it's inappropriate for either side to be talking directly to students at all.

"I think they're just trying to use it as a tool, and it's a little underhanded," said Ted Chiasson, the DSU Treasurer.

"There's a serious risk if one side is allowed to present their side as the official view...of that [view] being biased."

DSU president Chris Adams agrees.

"I don't think students should be made toys or pawns in any sort of contract negotiations. Students are directly affected by everything that goes on with these negotiations and we're the ones who face the consequences."

Adams also says it is important to keep students up to date — but with accurate information.

"The DSU has continually been trying to reach out to students with an unbiased perspective," he said.

The DSU sent out a mass e-mail of their own three weeks ago to the roughly 2,000 students who have asked to be on their mailing

list. It also published an open letter in the Gazette and is currently sending council members to talk to classes.

Another attempt to reach students via e-mail is being prepared.

University spokesperson Michelle Gallant won't comment on the faculty letter, but says the university is focusing on the contract talks.

"We would hope everyone would focus on negotiations at the negotiating table," she said.

The university has not made any attempt to contact students directly.

Ugursal says he thinks that is part of the problem.

"Of course we have to tell our students what we are doing, why we are doing it, and that we are correct."

"It would be unacceptable if we didn't communicate with our students," he said. "If this [negotiation] ends up in a strike then clearly our students will be inconvenienced...we have a moral duty to explain why we might have to take this drastic measure."

Strategic election

continued from page 1...

Jessica Squires, national executive representative for the Nova Scotia component of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), says her organization will take an active role in the campaign: arranging candidate debates, circulating petitions and organizing an election kit which will inform students of how they can register to vote.

"We're going to campaign to get students to vote. Even if they aren't from here, they're still eligible to vote if they're returning," she said.

Squires also says the CFS will be asking candidates to endorse a point-form education strategy, which she says will constitute a "re-investment in post-secondary education".

The strategy includes demands for a tuition freeze, a return in education funding to 1994 levels and improvements to the loan remission formula.

"We're looking to make sure the issues get addressed and that students make an informed decision," she said.

The Canadian Alliance of Students Associations (CASA), CFS's rival organization — of which Dalhousie is a member — does not operate on a provincial level and will not be active in the election campaign.

Student leaders say they are confident education will be an important component of the campaign.

"Student issues have come to the forefront at the federal level because of the significant effect education has on everyone's lives," Adams said, "and thus education should take a prominent role in this election."

Squires agrees.

"The polls indicate that education is ranked third [in importance] behind jobs and health," she said. "I don't think we'll have any problems getting the politicians to respond."

DFA continuation

continued from page 1...

"Other institutions have settled, and the details of those settlements are something to incorporate into the thinking, going into negotiations."

But Gallant says while the university wants to increase

professors' salaries, it isn't always that easy.

"It is a balancing act — we want to provide for reasonable increases [to professors' salaries] while being fair to students — who are directly affected by increases in [the university's] costs," she said.

Ugursal has a different take on what is good for the university, and for students.

"I do not want Dalhousie to turn into a second class joint...I would be ashamed to work here."

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