

The Left Jab

Who's Apathetic: Students or the Student Union?
by Nik Carrier

In UNBSU's CRO Dave Gourley's recent letter to *The Bruns* and *The Gleaner*, he berates UNB students for their "apathy" in the face of Student Union elections, which represents a chance "to exercise direct participatory democracy?"

But what does Gourley mean by "direct participatory democracy?" And how does this relate to the argument that Student Union candidates "deserve the attention" of the rest of us?

It's not students who are "apathetic." They are demoralized in Fredericton as a direct result of the "apathy" of the current student leadership. Just look at the UNB Student Union. In the face of the largest attacks on post-secondary education funding in Canadian history, it has remained essentially quiet. On only one occasion did it call a demonstration that would have involved more than just baby politicians and wanna-be Paul Martins, on Feb. 15, 1996. But even this was poorly handled. On that day, it was Francophone students from Edmundston and Moncton who saved UNBSU President Kelly Lamrock's butt. They represented 70% of the demonstrators.

Are we supposed to believe that students in Edmundston and Moncton are different than those in Fredericton? Of course not.

The difference in turnout can be explained by different attitudes of the student leaderships around the province. On Jan. 25, 1995, the single largest student mobilization in Canadian history occurred. Roughly 80,000 students across the country demonstrated to shield education from the Federal Liberal Party's axe. In Edmundston, they were organized in their hundreds and came out. In Moncton, literally thousands rallied. In Fredericton, the UNBSU and the NB

Student Alliance (which Lamrock headed at the time) spent its time in the lobby at the SUB actively discouraging concerned students from joining others across the province and country in solidarity.

Yet in spite of this kind of "leadership" from their Student Unions, about 80 people from both UNB, St. Thomas and people from labour marched down to Liberal MP Andy Scott's office from the UNB SUB.

The strategy of the UNBSU (as well as that of the STUSU and the NBSA) in the past year or two has been to lobby government. But this strategy has essentially left the rest of us uninvolved in the struggle to save education. Lamrock's argument sounds like, "Stay

home, we'll do the work for you." It also failed to produce any results. Indeed, Lamrock was involved intimately in the creation of CASA (Canadian Alliance of Student Associations), which is so (Ed's interjection-allegedly) corrupt that it's now being investigated by the RCMP. CASA's creation weakened the traditional national student organization, the CFS (Cdn Fed. Of Students), at the same time that the cuts were coming down from Chretien's government. The reason? CFS didn't lobby enough.

Instead, CFS was "only" building mass demonstrations that allowed the rest of us to add our own voices to growing chorus of opposition to the Federal Liberals.

To top all of this off, the UNBSU of the past year has had a scandal-ridden record: frequent resignations, internal bickering, and the irresponsible use of SU money were but a few of its many screw-ups.

This brings us back to Gourley's dubious statement that candidates deserve the "attention" of students in the upcoming SU elections. Do they? For the past year or two, the UNBSU has been led by people who have gone out of their way

to treat day-to-day students like children or objects to be manipulated. This doesn't generate "apathy," but it does demoralize students, who don't in turn feel confident enough to stand-up and defend what they know they deserve: a quality and free education.

But this can change quickly. Students, if given a real alternative to fight the cuts, will respond and get involved. The level of activism in Edmundston and Moncton is proof of that. It will require SU leadership, however, that does more than push for a lobbying strategy.

Yes students should vote in the next election. But we need to ask very important, but simple questions. Are any of the candidates proposing involvement with the growing student movement to stop the cuts to education and social programs? What is he or she going to do to help organize against cuts.

Smell the coffee Gourley. It's not students who are "apathetic". They are just able to perceive, better than you. It seems, that your "direct participatory democracy" produced in the last couple of years a crew of Young Liberals and other wanna-be's.

WOMYN SAY
"Woman's virtue is man's greatest invention"
Cornelia Otis Skinner (1901-1979)

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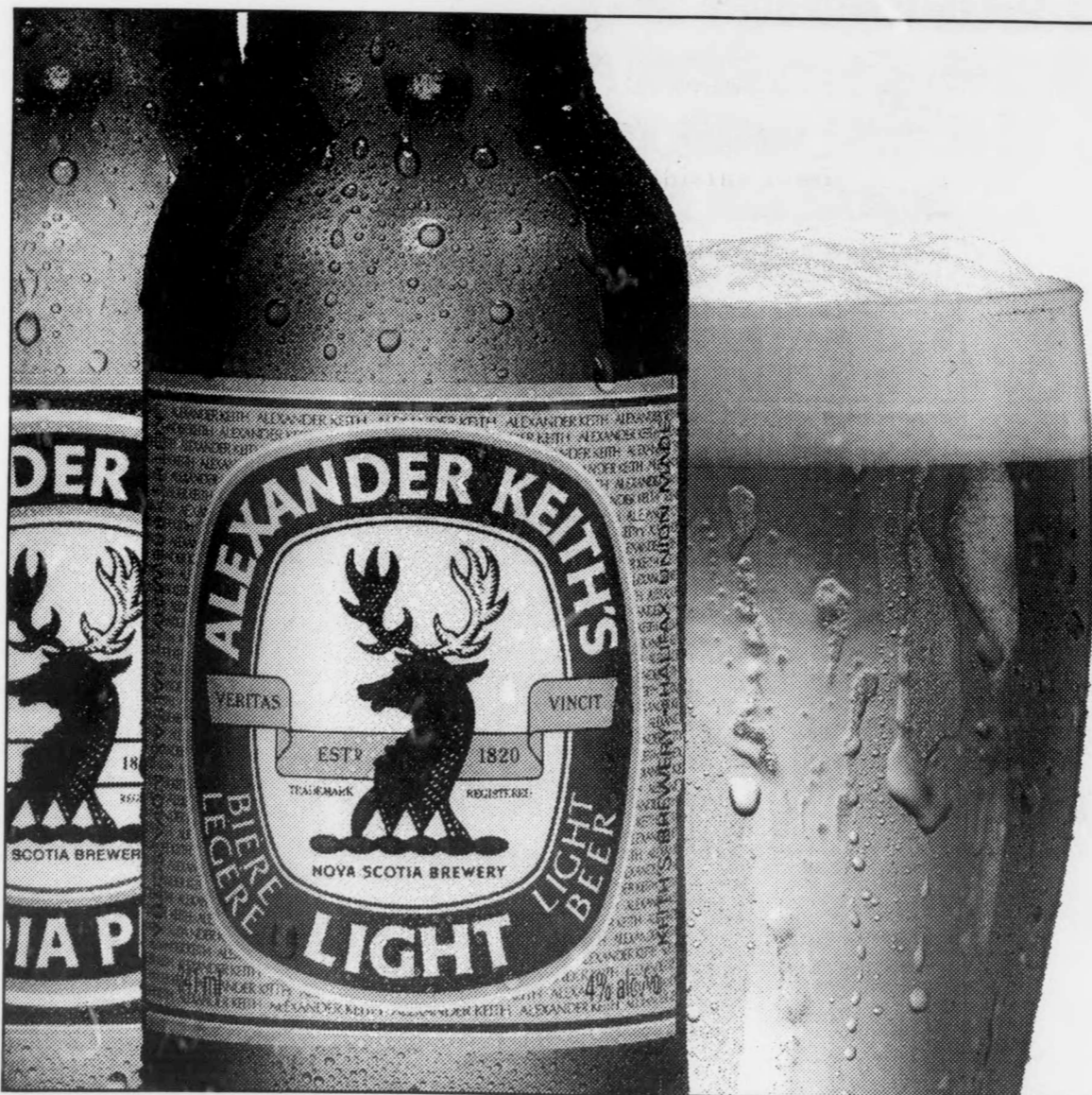
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