

# A snubbed Nova Scotia threatens to kiss Canadian Federation of Students good-bye

by Cathy McDonald

Problems. Students have their fair share of them. They are the unwilling rope in the federal-provincial tug-of-war over education financing; they take the brunt of university financial disasters and disgruntled faculty associations threatening strike action.

But the people trying to look out for student interests in all these battles are, arguably, having the most problems of all. And Nova Scotia students find themselves in the middle of a no-win situation.

Mention the name CFS (Canadian Federation of Students) around any Dalhousie student who went to the Nov. 7-12 conference in Victoria, and you'll be in for a barrage of venomous verbiage. Frustration with the student organization runs rampant. Accusations of manipulation and power plays that blocked Nova Scotians from having their concerns heard are coming from people who believe in, and want, a national student organization.

Mike Crystal, Nova Scotia rep on the Board of Directors of the CFS-Services wing, is one of those Dalhousie students. "There is a need for a national student organization. It doesn't necessarily have to be this one," he said.

The history of student political organizations has been anything but calm. The four-year old Student Unions of Nova Scotia (SUNS) emerged from the wreckage of the Atlantic Federation of Students in 1978. A loose grouping of campus student associations, SUNS has suffered from underfunding, underdevelopment and, until recently, lacked any rudiments of coordination and planning.

But when Nova Scotia students look to their national student body, the Canadian Federation of Students, they find another organization that can't seem to get it together. Nova Scotia needs CFS for political support. But when SUNS was crying out to CFS for critical aid last term, they drew a blank.

Student politicians are angry with the centralist organization, and many are saying Nova Scotia should withdraw from CFS membership and go it alone.

Of the five Nova Scotia members, all of them in Halifax, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, University of King's College and Saint Mary's student councils are definitely heading for getting out of CFS this year. Dalhousie is wavering, but close behind, which leaves Mount Saint Vincent.

The bitterness can be traced back to this past summer when the need for CFS resources and staff in Nova Scotia was acute. In August the Buchanan government unleashed a rash of cutbacks. It restricted student bursaries to students who had taken out the full loan portion. Formerly, students were eligible for a \$1,700 grant after taking \$1,400 of the maximum \$1,800 loan.

Next the government closed down the Atlantic Institute of Education, the unique source of post graduate education degrees for practising teachers and school administrators who couldn't return to university full-time.

And it sliced a few million bucks from university budgets.

SUNS was caught with its pants down. But CFS could have helped, according to Peter Rans, Dal student council president. SUNS needed information on other student aid programs, most of which are better than Nova Scotia's. Or CFS could have flown an informed staffperson into Halifax.

"This past summer was outrageous," Crystal said. "CFS was totally unaware of what was happening."

Brenda Coté, head of the CFS executive, agrees in retrospect with this assessment. "It was clear at the (executive) meeting after the last conference that we had to look at our stand with the Atlantic provinces and put into question...the lack of priority they were given. The question is why do we recognize it when it is so bad? When the Atlantic Institute



Mike Crystal, rep on the CFS-Services Board of Directors: Nova Scotia was treated like a "shit disturber".

of Education closed down, that was the time (to react)...I don't only regret it. It's more than regretting. It's like we really fucked things up."

CFS is a democratic organization, with members in all provinces. Through motions at national conferences, change is possible, and as SUNS would say, change is definitely needed.

From interviews with Christine Soucie, a Saint Mary's councillor who represents Nova Scotia on the national executive, or Central Committee (CC), Brenda Coté, CFS's head honcho as chairperson of the CC, and Mike Crystal, everything points to the Central Committee itself as the area where change is needed.

"The CC is a body of 16 people," Soucie said. "Do you think you can get much done? Everything is decided by consensus: we spent four hours on one of 21 items. It's just retarded."

Coté blames the CC for not recognizing the resources Nova Scotia needs. The CC suffers from a "national perspective" she said, an outlook that doesn't realize some regions are more needy than others.

"What the national perspective (should) mean in concrete terms is recognizing many provincial differences. Not every province or campus has attained the same status as other organizations like Ontario...they (the CC) very often say we can't have that. We have to treat everyone equally because it's the national perspective. But you can't do that. Some provinces are underdeveloped and you have to accept that."

By using Ontario as the yardstick, Nova Scotia is being compared to a province that boasts nine salaried staff. SUNS, on the other hand, has a half-time paid co-ordinator for the first time this year. It is currently without an Atlantic field-worker, as the last one resigned in October after six weeks of work and replacement is not expected until the end of December.

Nova Scotia delegates in Victoria tried to criticize the CC, accusing it of being unresponsive, and leaving too many decisions up to the paid staff.

"There's a block on the CC that is opposed to any discontent," Soucie said. "They're afraid that the membership might overturn something they think is for the good of the national organization."

Crystal said SUNS was treated like a "shit disturber" when it tried to address an even deeper issue marring its relationship with

CFS, at the Victoria conference. The problem is a constitutional clause that threatens SUNS' identity, by disqualifying Saint Francis Xavier and Acadia student unions' membership in SUNS.

This policy stems from the birth of the Canadian Federation of Students two years ago. CFS is itself a new deal, born of a two-year long "restructuring" debate in the former National Union of Students.



Brenda Coté, chairperson of the CFS national executive, commenting on the possibility of Nova Scotia pulling out of the national body: "You can be outside of it completely, or inside and fighting within"

The clause in the CFS constitution that poses a dilemma for SUNS is the "congruent membership" factor. A campus cannot be a member of either a provincial or the national body. It must by definition belong to both. But Acadia and St. F.X. student councils are adamantly opposed to joining the national body, so they can't belong to SUNS either.

SUNS faces the prospect of remaining a part of CFS and seeing itself disintegrate.

"We have to turn away our own schools," Crystal said. "Saint F.X. and Acadia won't stay."

Brenda Coté defended the congruent membership principle. "When I was on a council (Université de Moncton), if I wanted

to defend policy I could do it on the provincial and local level, that was accessible. But there are other issues that affect education that are primary. You need a national organization to fight those issues. You can't isolate Acadia from Simon Fraser (in Burnaby, B.C.). If Acadia gets higher tuition fees and Simon Fraser does also, it's the same struggle."

The compromise offered by CFS to hesitant institutions like Acadia is to take out a "prospective membership". For a low fee, a prospective member has full voting privileges and can decide in three years whether or not to join.

But neither St. F.X. nor Acadia have jumped to the offer. "They (CFS) could not see why a provincial organization (like SUNS) would want to be a part of the national organization plus build on its own," said Crystal. "CFS thinks SUNS is self-indulgent. They keep saying, 'What can we do? What do you want?' We want the right to our own development."

CFS is reacting to the threat of Nova Scotia institutions pulling out of the deal, but it may be too little, too late.

One solution being considered is a "development grant" for Nova Scotia. The grant, which could take the form of funds, resources, or both, could help SUNS grow. But some Nova Scotia members see the grant as a band-aid at best, and a bribe at worst.

"The national budget is not in the best financial situation for them to shower us with grants," Crystal said. "We need fuller representation in the national organization. If they can't see that, it throws into question the whole idea. They're saying stay, stay in CFS, at the risk of your own organization."

Dalhousie joined CFS only last March, through a campus referendum during the general student elections. To pull out would entail another referendum.

The decision whether or not to pull out of CFS is critical. More than ever, now, the future of post secondary education is being decided at the federal government level, as that's where most of the education bucks are (about 60 per cent).

The need for CFS political campaigns, to get the student voice heard, is pressing. A new student aid program and new methods of channelling funds to the provinces with lots of strings attached (like improving conditions for strengthening professional training at the expense of liberal arts), are all being decided right now with bureaucrats and politicians bargaining away in meeting rooms across the country.

The question is: Is the possibility of change in CFS strong enough to allow members like Dalhousie to stick with it and help create a new direction that would make its \$21,000 fee pay off?

"Do you quit and say 'no way, (CFS) isn't going to change'?" Coté said. "Or do you try to change...If (CFS) does change, it's because of the membership. That's why it's important that the membership recognize this...You can be outside of it completely, or inside and fighting within it."

"I certainly see something happening, right now its happening. For example, we lose Nova Scotia, we're not a national organization anymore. If that's not a big thing, I don't know what is," said Coté.

Mike Crystal asked himself the same question. "Is it better to stay in a compromised national organization and change from the inside? I say this one (CFS) is doing more harm than none at all."

So where does that leave Nova Scotia? "Maybe we're fooling ourselves," Crystal said. "Maybe SUNS wouldn't get any better. If it's going to have a go at developing our own services, developing our own organization, then I'm proud, I'm all for it. But if Nova Scotia institutions aren't willing, then there's no question. We should stay in the national organization."

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