

# Social justice group avoids challenge

BY SHELLEY ROBINSON

The Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group wouldn't have had an office if a referendum question capable of pulling their funding had passed.

As it is, the Nova Scotia Public Interest Group (NSPIRG) office is in a room that has been referred to as "the Closet of the Revolution". Executive director Jen Reynolds works everyday cramped by computers, desks, stacked bookshelves, and people.

One floor below, Dalhousie Student Union (DSU) vice-president academic/external Kevin Lacey works in what people call "the party office". There's usually loud music in the space he shares with vp community affairs Terrence Tam. There's also a lot of stuff. A huge beach ball, pom-poms, an unplugged popcorn machine, a couch and — like Reynolds' office — stacks and stacks of paper.

Both organizations serve the same pool of students, and both are housed in the Student Union Building. But both also say it was a serious lack of communication that had the DSU proposing to shut down NSPIRG as a publicity stunt.

Lacey made a motion at the Jan. 25 Dalhousie Student Union (DSU) council meeting proposing a referendum question on whether to continue the \$4 per student levy for the social justice group.

Had the question successfully gone to referendum and the vote passed, NSPIRG would have been dissolved, and its assets turned into a scholarship fund.

But the question never made it out of council chambers. It was defeated unanimously after Reynolds spoke to the council. Even Lacey ended up voting against his own motion.

The question was intended to make NSPIRG accountable to students, Lacey says.

"We pay all this money to these places, and a lot of the time students don't get the opportunity to see what it is that they do.

"This is a particular political organization, who take political stances — what's wrong with having them come out and show what gains

they've made?" he asked. "If students liked what they saw, then they would support their organization."

Reynolds says the group struggles with people not quite understanding who they are or what they do. But Reynolds says the referendum question wasn't the ideal way to increase their exposure.

"The mandate of [NSPIRG]...is very wide reaching. I think people have a hard time grasping that so many things can come out of one office," she said. "There are more creative ways [than a referendum] to raise awareness of [NSPIRG] on campus."

And in retrospect, Lacey agrees. "I make mistakes," he said. "I think [the referendum question] may have been too harsh. I think that

[NSPIRG] deserves more communication. Certainly they're putting a lot of hours in with their work and I respect that."

Lacey, who through his work supports the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) — a student organization often considered politically middle of the road or slightly right of centre — is emphatic that ideological differences had nothing to do with the referendum question to shut down a group long associated with the political left.

"It's not a political issue," he said. "That's definitely not an issue."

"I could have chosen any society, I just chose them because they were around."

And so while Reynolds says she thinks society accountability is a

good thing, she also seems a little bewildered about just how NSPIRG's head came to rest so squarely on the block.

"There is no safeguard," she said. "I would be interested to look into the [DSU] constitution and see how a motion can be made that affects another society's funding without their prior knowledge."

Referendum questions can be proposed in council by those who sit on council, or at the DSU's annual general meeting by any student.

Reynolds acknowledges that there has been an awkward history between the student union and the research group, but both sides agree that now that the problem — miscommunication — has been identified, they should move on.

"In the past there has always been

tension...there was a lot of antagonism and I don't know why that keeps being perpetuated," Reynolds said. "So I finally feel like...we've reached a point maybe where we can step beyond that and stop putting our energies...into fighting the DSU — because we're not fighting, we have different aims but I don't think they're exclusive."

Lacey agrees.

"I think that what has come out of this has been constructive. [The meeting with council] can be considered a focus group of sorts."

But when asked to describe how things might be different if NSPIRG were running the student union, Reynolds can only laugh.

"Who! I get an office with a window."

## Finance Minister visits Dalhousie

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"In the budget we came forth with a very comprehensive package dealing with accessibility to higher education, we're looking for feedback on the measures that we brought forth and the areas where they think improvements could be made," Martin said.

Martin defended the Fund and emphasized the federal government's current initiatives.

"There were a whole series of measures, about seven, all of which kick in immediately except for the Millennium Fund. If we can get it set up and into operation earlier, we're very open about that, but unfortunately there's just a lag time to getting it set up and that's the biggest problem that we're facing."

Martin alluded to other tax breaks for students and a more generous system of grants, but when pressed for details about such initiatives, he quickly backed down.

"Right now there'll be no further changes," he said, "but one of the things we're talking about with the student leaders and one of the things we want to talk about with the [university] presidents is what else should be done and how much can we afford."

Student leaders used the time with

Martin and MacLellan to address post-secondary issues specific to Nova Scotia.

"There's a lot of anomalies that exist out in Nova Scotia that don't exist anywhere else in Canada," said Saint Mary's student union president, John Francis.

He says Nova Scotia has a disproportionate number of mature, part-time and single parent students.

"I think that's the biggest thing, the different regional characteristics that you have to hammer home," Francis said.

Chiasson echoed Francis' points about Nova Scotia's unique student

population, and added that more federal funding for research is another important issue.

"Research is one of the things we should emphasize next year," Chiasson said. "As well, we got a chance to emphasize with the Premier the education issues and to try to get as much of a commitment as we could for funding for next year."

Both university and student representatives were cautiously optimistic about their meetings with the Premier and Minister.

"Our suggestions were well received and clearly understood. The

premier and the Minister listened [to us], but they are careful about the commitments they make at this point," McKee said.

Chiasson agreed, summing up the meetings.

"Decisions are made up of a whole bunch of impressions and I think that if we just keep meeting, keep meeting and keep meeting then it can only help. This was a quick meeting and it won't solve any problems entirely, but we have to change the course by nudges as opposed to one big push."

## Election brings promises

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relief for student debt.

"The only time you institute a freeze is when you've run out of ideas. A freeze won't fix anything," said John Hamm, leader of the provincial Progressive Conservative party.

Hamm says that unless funding is addressed, universities will have to cut back on the quality of education.

He says that his party's interest relief plan will allow students to pay loans down through provincial income tax. This plan is similar to that recently announced by the federal budget.

"The Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education recently recommended funding for universities...be increased by \$22-million dollars...that kind of funding will allow universities to voluntarily freeze admissions [fees]," he said.

"I think the premier is handling this in typical Liberal fashion...he's been ignoring this for five years, but now that an election is here, suddenly it's grabbed his attention."

Though Hamm's platform does not include any direct financial relief for students, like a tuition

freeze or bursaries, he feels his overall platform will benefit new graduates entering the job market.

"What's going through the minds of students now is are...job opportunities going to be that much better after making this investment [in their education]...it still is a worthwhile investment," he said, adding that with the new Sable Gas project, Nova Scotia's economy is likely to boom, providing plenty of career opportunities.

Jessica Squires, the Nova Scotia national executive representative for the Canadian Federation of Students feels that all of the proposals need serious examination.

"None [of the parties] has a comprehensive program," Squires said.

However, she is encouraged that all three parties are addressing student concerns.

"It's an example of how education is becoming an important issue. I think students will vote for a freeze on tuition fees."

She said that both the Liberal and NDP party platforms are incomplete.

"It won't do any good if they haven't increased funding."

She added that the PC platform, though positive for students, does not go far enough.

"They promised a tax credit...you only benefit if you have a job."

Squires said that the PC promise of part-time jobs for students should be combined with tuition relief of some sort. She pointed out that when a tuition freeze was promised in British Columbia, the results were far reaching.

"In BC the NDP gained from the parents of students and prospective students that were worried they could not afford to pay for their children's education.

"The immediate result was that the universities had to re-think their strategy...[tuition freezes] have an interesting effect of politicizing the university community," she said.

Dalhousie student union treasurer, Ted Chiasson, was "cautiously optimistic" about the promised freeze.

"I believe what we have to look at, instead of a freeze, or a raise...is what they call zero-line budgeting. We should start from zero and justify to the students why it got up to five grand anyway."

*For Effective Student Leadership...*

**VOTE MARCH 11, 12, 13**



**JEFF MYERS**

**VP STUDENT ADVOCACY**

THE GAZETTE IS ON THE LOOK OUT FOR WRITERS.  
THE NEXT GENERAL STAFF MEETING IS ON MONDAY MARCH  
2ND AT 4:30 PM IN ROOM 312 OF THE STUDENT UNION BUILDING.  
ALL WILLING ARE WELCOME.