

Report on QUFA Meeting with Federal Election Candidates
By Richard Day, Chair
QUFA Political Action and Communication Committee

Background

On Tuesday June 15 2004, members of the QUFA executive and PACC met informally with most of the candidates in the upcoming federal election. This report is intended to provide an overview of their responses to the questions we posed to them. No attempt has been made to produce an 'unbiased' or 'objective' account; rather, this represents my own reading of what was said, based on what I perceive as being the interests of our membership in the context of QUFA's political commitments as a trade union, and this year's PACC campaign on exposing and fighting corporate colonization of the university system.

The meeting was attended by Janina Fisher-Balfour (Green), Rob Hutchison (NDP), Blair MacLean (Conservative), and Don Rogers (Canadian Action Party). The Liberal candidate, Peter Milliken, was invited but did not attend the meeting.

- ▶ **Question: What ought to be the role of government in directing public support towards universities? What should be the nature of relationships between the public, the government, and universities?**

The Green Party Candidate spoke about providing sustainable solutions to the long-term problems of educational funding at all levels, via adequate state funding. Citing 'totally unbelievable' levels of student debt, she advocated working towards universal free tuition.

The NDP candidate suggested that Canada 'could not afford' to provide free tuition, and said that his party would cut tuition by 10% while increasing funding to the universities to compensate, as well as bringing in a needs-based grant system. The NDP platform also includes a promise to bring in a Canada Post-Secondary Education Act, which would ensure adequate state funding and prevent the creation of private institutions.

The Canadian Action Party Candidate said that his party shared the concerns of the Greens and NDP, but wanted to 'drill one level deeper to get to root causes', such as capitalist globalization / free trade. He also came out in favour of increased state funding for education, said that universal access to education was a 'right', and argued that we need to 'keep corporate sponsorship and influence out of the education system'.

The Conservative candidate also said that education 'has an important role to play in the future of our country', which for him meant using knowledge to 'stay ahead of the rest of the world'. That is, while the first three candidates appeared to oppose or be cautious about capitalist globalization, the Conservative candidate appeared to suggest that we embrace its values. He said his party would like to re-establish education transfers at the federal level and put pressure on provincial governments to 'ensure that universities do not suffer from cash flow problems'. He did not address the issue of privatization, which would be one way of dealing with cash-flow problems, and the way favoured by his party. When pressed on the issue of student debt, he acknowledged that his party would see students taking on more 'private' debt as a possible solution to access.

In the ensuing discussion, the NDP candidate pointed out that the institutions need to be adequately funded, rather than having students take on more debt with banks. The Green candidate suggested that this should be done on a US model, i.e. by increasing the attractiveness of endowment funding through tax incentives.

▶ **Question: How would your party provide further support to universities if you were to roll back tuition?**

CAP Mr. Rogers expressed his concern about the direction in which Principal Leggett has taken Queen's, i.e. 'towards an elitist institution'. He said that the federal government has to 'put teeth' in the Education Act, enforce it, as a way of influencing the provinces' education policies.

NDP Mr. Hutchison echoed the concern re the current direction of Queen's! 'Why do we want to be the Harvard of anything?' he asked. He talked about all of the things that need to be done to help universities, but did not answer the question about how his party would fund these programs.

CONS Mr. MacLean said the approach of his party would be 'somewhat indirect'. They would insist that the federal government live up to the terms of the Health Accord in 1993, which would relieve the pressure on the provinces to provide greater money for Health Care, thus freeing up money for education.

GRN Already answered this endowment.

▶ **Question: What about programs like Canada Research Chairs? They make a public display of federal commitment, but create an elitist system and distract attention from basic research that may not 'pay off' right away.**

All four of the candidates appeared to understand the drift of this question, local institutions should have greater power in deciding how to spend their money. I couldn't help noticing, though, that this is a big part of the Leggett plan, which several of them said they opposed.

▶ **Question: In two minutes, could you please tell us what our members most need to know about your party?**

NDP We are about increasing access for students; stabilized funding via a Post-Secondary Education Act; valuing science done for its merits, not for profit; halt privatization; improve physical plant.

CAP Repeated the slogan about 'drilling deeper'.

GRN Went in the opposite direction, higher rather than deeper, 'from the root cause to the next level of vision' for a 'long-term sustainable Canada'. Interestingly, the Green candidate spoke about working bottom-up rather than top-down, working 'with the people who are on the spot'.

CONS Talked about how bad the Liberals have been, fighting with each other and creating scandals while the economy falters.

Summation

My impression was that the Green, NDP, and CAP candidates were quite knowledgeable about the issues that face us as faculty members at Queen's University, and shared the values that drive our commitment to maintaining the public character of Queen's University and the university system as a whole. The Conservative candidate appeared less aware of local issues, and did not appear to share these values, but also did not appear to want us to *know* that he did not share them. Based on the Liberal platform and Paul Martin's status as one of the leading neo liberals on the global stage, I am of the opinion that if the Liberal candidate had attended the meeting, he would have found himself in a similar situation.

My opinion is that any of the Green, NDP, or CAP candidates would do a better job of talking with us and representing our interests than the Conservative or Liberal candidates.

Richard Day
Chair
Political Action & Communication Committee