

The anti-PIRG campus conservative conspiracy

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On January 21 2009, the Ontario Progressive Conservative Campus Association (OPCCA) held a series of workshops advising young conservatives on how to dominate campus discourse, take over student government, and attack their campus public interest research group (PIRG). In the following weeks, similar workshops were held at Carleton and Wilfred Laurier University.

Recordings from the Toronto session were released on WikiLeaks in March of that year. The speakers from the recording are Ryan O'Connor and Aaron Lee-Wudrick, both of whom were active in student politics, and their Conservative Party campus chapter, at the University of Waterloo.

In the recording, PIRGs were identified as a major obstacle to Conservative interests. "They use their institutional strength to deride and decry conservative causes," O'Connor explained. Lee-Wudrick added, "as if we don't have enough institutional opponents as it was. This is one that, at least in theory, can be defeated." Drawing on their experiences at Waterloo, O'Connor and Lee-Wudrick spent an hour sharing ways for, to quote from the title of the Wilfred Laurier workshop, "challenging and defeating PIRGs".

The tactics they recommend include infiltrating the PIRGs, attacking their stances on hot-button issues like abortion and Israel-Palestine, building anti-PIRG coalitions comprised of shell groups, and attacking their sources of revenue. In recent years, such campaigns have been launched by campus conservatives at Simon Fraser University, Dalhousie, four universities in Ontario, and here at McGill. Each of them has borrowed from the OPCCA's playbook in one way or another.

McGill's PIRG

The ongoing conservative-led campaign against QPIRG McGill primarily encourages students to opt-out of their annual \$7.50 student fee.

QPIRG puts this money toward their rent to McGill, their 19 working groups, and a number of research projects they choose to fund. They also publish an agenda for students called School Shmool, and work with the SSMU to coordinate annual events such as Social Justice Days, Culture Shock, and Rad Frosh. "QPIRG has a mandate for environmental and social justice," said Andrea Figueroa, QPIRG's external coordinator, "and part of our mandate is an anti-oppression framework. ... So a lot of what we do is support financially other groups that work on different issues that are not necessarily heard."

The QPIRG opt-out campaign, coordinated primarily by Conservative McGill, has been ongoing since 2008. "At first they were crass and saying that these hippies should buy more shampoo," said QPIRG's former external coordinator Indu Vashist. "Now they're saying, with three dollars you can buy pizza and beer and that kind of tactic."

Anna Malla, QPIRG's internal coordinator, added that QPIRG independently established the opt-out system in the 1980s. In 2007, however, McGill transferred opt-outs onto the online Minerva system, in what QPIRG considers to be a gross violation of their Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) with the University, which stipulates that QPIRG may maintain control of its opt-out system.

The opt-out campaign's leaders have consistently encouraged students to opt out of QPIRG's fee because it "represents a radical fringe of the McGill community."

In an interview with *The Daily* last February, Conservative McGill president Jess Weiser emphasized that QPIRG "does not represent the majority of McGill students." He repeatedly pointed to QPIRG's support for Tadamon! – a Palestine solidarity group that supports the removal of Hezbollah from Canada's list of terrorist organizations – as well as its support for the Chaotic Insurrection Ensemble – a marching band that espouses anarchist beliefs.

Other QPIRG working groups include Campus Crops, Climate Justice Montreal, Justice for the Victims of Police Killings, and a group called End Exploitation, which aims to improve labour conditions for foreign and temporary agency workers.

Weiser has not responded to our requests for an interview for this article. Nor has Tribune columnist Brendan Steven – also a member of Conservative McGill and active in the opt-out campaign. (According to his Facebook profile, Steven has previously interned with Peter Braid, a Conservative Member of Parliament representing Kitchener-Waterloo who spoke at the OPCCA's strategy workshop at Wilfred Laurier. Braid also formerly employed Lee-Wudrick as his campaign manager. Braid's office has also not returned *The Daily's* interview requests.)

For Vashist, the opt-out campaign is "still not getting to the core of the issues about why they oppose QPIRG. They're not articulating what their political problem is."

QPIRG has found the opt-out campaign's allegations that their operations are undemocratic particularly infuriating.

"Our Board of Directors is elected by students every year at the annual general meeting, and it's the same way that SSMU councilors get elected," said Figueroa. "They pick what to fund and what they don't. They have the same process as QPIRG, so I find that them claiming that just means that they don't understand how QPIRG works and how our structure works."

Malla added that the opt-out campaign has strenuously avoided open dialogue on the issues of contention. "They're saying that we're undemocratic, when they're not actually trying to engage with any of our democratic mechanisms," she said. "We tried last year, we contacted everyone from every single group at least twice to try to have a discussion with them; it's not what they want."

"They don't want dialogue," said Malla, "they want to shut us down".

Tactics

Several other conservative campus groups have also promoted opt-outs as a means of attacking PIRGs' bottom lines. Many have also attempted to eliminate the PIRGs' student funding altogether.

"What we're seeing here is very much in line with what's going on across the rest of the country," said Malla.

In the WikiLeaks file, O'Connor and Lee-Wudrick encouraged the students to attempt to terminate PIRGs' student fees altogether by holding a campus referendum. "Getting them off the fee statement should be the ultimate objective," said O'Connor in the recording.

These efforts to eliminate PIRGs' funding have been tried on numerous occasions by the conservative attack campaigns, but have been met with tough resistance.

O'Connor and Lee-Wudrick's own attempts to de-fund Waterloo PIRG (WPIRG) were voted down at student council, and they never managed to hold a referendum on the question. Last February at Simon Fraser, a group of students organizing against Simon Fraser PIRG (SFPIRG) put forth a referendum question to de-fund the group, but the appeal did not have enough student support and never made it onto the ballot.

Likewise, at Dalhousie in 2009, a motion to de-fund and disband Dalhousie's Nova Scotia PIRG (NSPIRG) was voted down at the most attended Annual General Meeting in the history of the student union.

OPIRG Kingston at Queen's, and OPIRG Carleton have also faced attempts to revoke their fee levy at student union referendums.

Jane Kirby, NSPIRG's resource coordinator, has taken note of the parallels between the anti-PIRG campaigns. "In the spring of 2009, when all this stuff was coming up, I used to be involved at the OPIRG [Kingston] at Queen's. And I got an email from OPIRG at Queen's that basically, there was going to be a motion at the AGM [Annual General Meeting]. It was worded almost exactly the same as some of the attacks we were seeing here."

Similarly, in mid-October Spencer Burger – a SSMU councillor and member of Conservative McGill – attempted to bring a motion to SSMU council that would have instigated a referendum calling for the abolition of QPIRG's student fee. The question was ruled out of order because, like SSMU, QPIRG is an independent body and has its own MoA with the University.

Misrepresentation

Anti-PIRG campaigns often turn to additional tactics that have little, if anything, to do with the political work of PIRGs.

At the OPCCA strategy session, O'Connor and Lee-Wudrick encouraged the students to attack the PIRGs using "non-ideological" rhetoric. "Never let it devolve into an issue of free speech," said O'Connor. "It's not an ideological bone the conservatives are picking. We're just concerned about using mandatory fees to fund causes that not everyone supports."

By touting an opportunity to save pocket change, the campaigns have commonly gone so far as to attack PIRGs' fee structures on bases that are entirely removed from political or ethical disagreements.

These are, as Lee-Wudrick said, "a lot easier to sell to people," because they are approaches that appear non-partisan and non-political.

The Waterloo conservatives also encouraged students to de-fund the PIRG by standing in the food court and directing people to the nearby WPIRG office, where they could reimburse their fee and score a "free lunch." In 2007, the Reagan-Goldwater Society at Carleton likewise set up a table advertising free beer money at OPIRG Carleton. In 2006 and 2007 at Dalhousie, a group called NSPIRG Truth disseminated a list of things students could buy with \$4 if they opt out of the NSPIRG fee.

Conservative McGill has used virtually identical tactics, encouraging students to opt out not on ethical grounds, but simply for the purpose of saving some change. Their Facebook page, for instance, features a list of “Things you can buy for \$7.50”, which includes things like “4 Packs of Extra gum,” “3/4th of the average club cover fee,” “Hemp String,” and “a Yo-yo.”

“Really it’s just that they disagree with our politics and that’s why they are opposing us,” said Malla. “We’re a social justice and environmental justice organization and the fact that this small group of students opposes that, that’s one thing. But that’s not what they’re publicizing.”

Shell Groups

Throughout the leaked recording, O’Connor and Lee-Wudrick repeatedly advised against associating anti-PIRG campaigns too closely with the Conservative party. “If you start complaining, people just pin it on you being a conservative,” Lee-Wudrick warned. O’Connor agreed: “You create your spin about the real issue, and nothing else.”

At Waterloo, the spin involved creating a fake anti-WPIRG coalition with shell organizations. Members of the campus conservatives established nonexistent groups like the “Campus Coalitions for Liberty,” and a group called CRAZY! (“Campus Radicals Against Zimbabwe Yes, or something like that,” mused Lee-Wudrick nostalgically. “They were a great shell group.” Likewise, he added, the campus Coalition for Liberty “was really just a front for the conservatives, but it gave us like two voices.”) These groups had virtually no membership or activity whatsoever outside of signing on to the anti-WPIRG campaign.

O’Connor additionally joked about telling the media on certain occasions that the Coalition for Liberty had chapters at five different campuses across the country: “We had branches at five campuses. Yeah, we had five people; one at each of five campuses. And they’re all Tories! ... I founded a chapter of the Campus Coalition for Liberty. It was a guy with a computer and a press release.”

The situation at McGill is equally convoluted. Up until recently, the opt-out campaign boasted of the “diversity of clubs” that had signed on to its campaign. Last year the signatories to the opt-out campaign’s “Open Letter to QPIRG McGill” consisted of a motley crew of groups like the Anatomy and Cell Biology Student Association, the Liberal Party of Quebec McGill, Conservative McGill, Free the Children McGill Chapter, and the Student Network for Economic Development. Things seem to have fallen apart to some extent last semester, with the only signatories to the re-issued open letter consisting of three Euro-ethnic student groups (the Swiss, Hellenic, and Italian student associations) in addition to Conservative McGill. None of the administrators of these groups’ Facebook pages returned the interview requests made by The Daily last October. Since then, all of them – including Conservative McGill – as of press time seem to have removed their organizations’ names from the website qpirgoptout.com, as well as the group’s Facebook page.

Takeovers

“If it’s possible, in one fell swoop, to take over the Board of Directors [of a PIRG], I think that would be pretty impressive, and you’d be a hero to the conservative movement,” Lee-Wudrick states in the WikiLeaks recording. “It would be a long term, pretty funny undertaking to do.”

Last year a student who was eventually revealed to be a leader of the anti-WPIRG campaign attempted, without success, to run for a position on the board.

Several students affiliated with Campus Conservatives ran for the OPIRG Guelph Board in 2009, but they also failed to be elected. At Dalhousie, the group NSPIRG Truth attempted to get its members on the NSPIRG Board of Directors. One person was elected, but did not effect significant change due to the consensus-based decision making process used by NSPIRG.

Lee-Wudrick and O'Connor point to these failed attempts as proof that PIRGs are indeed partisan organizations that have no right to students' money. Emily Aspinwall from SFPIRG disagrees. "Following a certain set of values and stances on issues doesn't mean you're partisan. We never advocate for any particular political parties," said Aspinwall. She added, "Anyone who's interested in working on social and environmental justice can come and get involved here."

The antagonism that is taking place between campus conservatives and PIRGs across the country is originating with the former, not the latter

"I've been on this campus for at least ten years," said Aspinwall of SFPIRG, "and this is the worst I've ever seen it in terms of attack on a student-based organization."

It is clear that the opt-out campaign taking place at McGill is part of a much larger and highly targeted effort to undermine PIRGs. The entire purpose of the OPCCA's strategy workshops was, after all, to encourage such campaigns to spread.

Malla sees this trend as having a seriously detrimental effect on campus politics.

"Some of the steps that have been similar to different campuses is the fact that councillors were the ones that presented this motion to defund us," said Malla, referring to the attempted motion by Burger.

"Councillors are elected to represent the student body, and they're listening to a small, small group of extreme conservatives on campus and running with it, and that's a problem. And that's been happening on other campuses: the strategies of delegitimizing student unions with stupid motions, pretending there's a large coalition, when really there's a small group of extreme conservatives who want to stifle student life."