

Defence minister talks campus military recruitment, student debt

Peter MacKay seeks re-election against Green Party leader in St. FX riding

By Danielle Webb

CUP Atlantic Bureau Chief

ANTIGONISH (CUP) – Growing up the son of a member of Parliament, Conservative Cabinet Minister Peter MacKay "avoided politics like the plague."

MacKay says growing up with a father in politics ensured that he was always aware of it, but it was not a career he had any intention of pursuing.

It wasn't until he started practicing law and became frustrated with the inadequacies of the justice system that MacKay began to contemplate solutions.

Since then, he has held the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party, as well as been appointed as the foreign affairs minister and defence minister under Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

"I started asking the basic question: how do you change laws? How do you make laws more effective? And the most direct route is to go to where the laws are made," said MacKay.

MacKay was first elected to the House of Commons in June 1997, representing the Pictou-Antigonish-Guysborough riding, later known as Central Nova.

MacKay's riding is home to St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S. He's well aware of the important role students play, and plans to engage them as he would any other con-

stituent, by making appearances in places where students will be and approaching students individually.

"There's really no shortcuts in campaigns. You have to go and present your ideas, defend them, listen. I think every campaign has to be cautious not to lose sight of the fact that it's an opportunity to consult, and that means having open ears, as well," said MacKay.

MacKay is working to ensure that there are employment opportunities available to students upon graduation.

"I'm cognoscente of the fact that we need to help students transition into the workforce, and that means looking at the subject of debt relief. . . . I have a very open mind about this," said MacKay.

MacKay acknowledges that the provinces have the primary responsibility over education, but the federal government needs to work with the provinces to ensure financial reasons are not keeping students from attending post-secondary education.

MacKay also believes there needs to be a dedicated funds-transfer to the provinces for education, similar to the way money is transferred for things like health care. Currently one does not exist.

MacKay is wary of the Green Shift plan proposed by his Central Nova competitor, Green Party Leader Elizabeth May. He believes it will be a very unpopular

position in Atlantic Canada.

"In a time of sky rocketing energy prices . . . to suggest that it's good news for consumers to put more tax on top of that, I think is going to a hard sell. Particularly for the primary industries – farming, fishing, forestry – they rely heavily on diesel fuel," said MacKay.

"I would not want to be going door-to-door saying, 'Vote for me and I promise to put your taxes up.'"

MacKay believes a lot of Canadians simply misunderstand the various aspects of the role Canada is playing in Afghanistan.

He was quick to note the "very democratic vote" to extend the Afghanistan mission until February 2011.

"This is the first time that two separate votes on such an important international mission, that has UN-sanction, is NATO-led, and is there at the invitation of the Afghan government, also has the democratic endorsement of the Parliament of Canada," he said.

"I can't think of a more democratic expression from our country."

"A lot of what gets lost on Canadians is the over-



Peter MacKay discusses issues about National Defense while at St. FX

–Photo: Catherine Fancy - The Xaverian Weekly

whelming focus on the combat mission," he added.

But in addition to the security aspect, Canada is providing education, immunization, agriculture and infrastructure resources, and enabling women to participate in democracy, not only by voting, but by sitting in government, MacKay says.

"Twenty-seven per cent of the Afghan parliament now is comprised of women. That's more than Canada. That's progress," he said.

MacKay notes the sacrifice that Canada is making in the Afghan mission – 97 soldiers and one diplomat have died since the mission began.

By the time the Canadian military finishes their mission in 2011, MacKay says Afghans will have a greater ability to protect their own people, promote their own civil rights, and defend their sovereignty. Contributions to development and recon-

struction will still continue past 2011.

MacKay also notes the contribution that young Canadians make to the Armed Forces, and thinks the recent advertising campaign on Canadian universities was effective.

"I think that the way that it was presented caught a lot of people's attention.

"As the ad says, it is about fighting fear and chaos, and it's about providing much more than just bombs. It's about creating an atmosphere and a security situation in different parts of the world that really need it," said MacKay.

"Our soldiers are among the most respected anywhere in the world," he added.

In the event that MacKay is not re-elected on Oct. 14, he can always go back to painting.

"I keep that kind of quiet. I don't do art shows, but it's a hobby."