

# **PIRG Power**

## **Public Interest Research Groups in Canada celebrate 25 years of student activism**

An article by:

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While virtually everyone has heard of at least one of the high profile environmental or social justice groups like Greenpeace, Pollution Probe or Amnesty International, few have heard of the PIRGs, or Public Interest Research Groups. And yet for years, students at universities across Canada have been contributing to environmental and social justice as part of the PIRG movement.

Dalhousie PIRG's ECO-Action Working Group ran a successful campaign to stop an incinerator in the Halifax area. Quebec PIRG published *Hungry for Justice: A Montreal Guide to Socially Responsible Food Choices*. Concordia's PIRG students run a natural food store. The Women and Health Project at OPIRG Peterborough has delivered peer-facilitated workshops on safe sex to young women. For the last 19 years, OPIRG Guelph has organized hundreds of students and community members to clean up the city's rivers and rehabilitate its riverbanks. For returning students Simon Fraser PIRG's Environmental Action Group organized an Earth Fair, which featured films and speakers on a variety of issues from composting in residences to preserving the Stoltmann Wilderness from clear cutting.

Last year the PIRGs celebrated a quarter century of student activism. On October 13, 1972, at the request of the Waterloo Federation of Students and Kitchener-Waterloo Pollution Probe, US consumer advocate Ralph Nader spoke to 1800 people at the University of Waterloo. Nader expounded on pollution and corporate irresponsibility, and sketched a vision of a continent-wide system of independent consumer groups linked together and contributing to a central research body. Four days later, 90 inspired students met to organize support for a student fee to establish the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG). In the words of one of the early organizers, this new group's goal was to pursue and analyze consumer protection and fight discrimination based on sex or race.<sup>1</sup>

Those were the heady days of student activism. Little did the organizers at Waterloo know that students at McMaster, Guelph and Trent were just a step behind. Since 1973, the movement has grown to 18 PIRGs in Canada (one PIRG in Nova Scotia, three in Quebec, 11 in Ontario and three in British Columbia). PIRGs at McMaster and Windsor were lost along the way only to be established again in recent years. PIRGs at Western and the University of Montreal were also lost and have yet to be reorganized. All have had their share of the ups and downs common to volunteer-based organizations. Yet, PIRGs have survived and grown. In fact, the PIRG experience debunks the media portrayal of youth as lazy and apathetic.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Lehn, *In the Public Interest: Ten Years of PIRG at Waterloo* (Waterloo, Ontario: WPIRG, 1983).



US consumer advocate and PIRG founder Ralph Nader during a 1984 lecture series sponsored by the U of Guelph and OPIRG: in an October 13, 1972 address at Waterloo Nader spoke of pollution, corporate irresponsibility and a vision of a continent-wide system of independent consumer groups linked together and contributing to a central research body. Four days later the first Canadian PIRG was established.

### **What Is a PIRG?**

PIRGs work primarily with youth, in this case youth being defined as university students. PIRGs provide a structure to harness the energy and innovation of students to address issues of public concern. University students, in general, are provided an opportunity to explore their place within society. Not all students are able to put aside their real concerns of future employment and economic security long enough to worry about genocide in East Timor or preservation of water resources. For many of those that do, PIRGs have been their destination.

The way a PIRG gets established is really quite simple - but a lot of work! Students on a campus organize a vote to determine whether they will contribute a small fee towards the operation of a PIRG. If the proposition is approved, a board of directors consisting of students is established. An office is set up with a resource library, computer services, staff, meeting space and much more. Staff provide consistency from year to year so students can put their time and talents to efforts other than maintaining or 'reinventing' the organization. The same rules that voted the PIRG in will apply if students at any PIRG campus hold a vote to stop funding - the PIRG there would cease to exist.

At the core of PIRGs' success as a model for student involvement is the 'working group'. Working groups are established through the interests and creativity of PIRG members. Any PIRG will have a variety of working groups. While board members, as student volunteers, may also identify projects and programmes for the organization, their primary role, along with staff, is to support the interests of students in their working groups.

PIRGs take on many important issues. The training that participants receive during their tenure at the PIRG is equally important. To understand the PIRG model is to understand that at its roots, the organization provides training, support and real opportunities for its members to be active in their community.

PIRGs are not an academic exercise. PIRGs are not just another educational setting for students where they can read books on activism or hear lectures on what methods are effective. The authenticity of the PIRG experience for students is that it is an activist organization. The success of PIRGs as a model of youth participation has been their ability to balance process with goals, training with activism. Students haven't just talked about the environmental problems of incineration. They have stopped incineration in their communities. Students haven't just researched the degradation of river habitat. They have cleaned up rivers and planted trees.

PIRGs strive for participatory democracy and a commitment to the collective public good. We have been raised in a largely competitive, individualistic and hierarchical society that tries to silence us by

teaching us to respect authority whether that is our parents, teachers or political and business leaders. In contrast, PIRGs provide a place for students to meet where they can work with others and have a voice on the issues that are important to them.

For many it is their first 'activist' home. Here they are exposed to issues other than the ones that brought them there and they begin to understand the complex connections between environmental and social justice issues. It is the dynamic tension that exists within each PIRG in its struggle to be an effective activist organization while accommodating the inexperience of young activists that keeps the organization young and vibrant.

While the roots of the model have remained intact over the years, the movement has changed paths many times. These changes have not been through any grand design, but they are consistent with the essential logic of the PIRG model.

### **A Different Path in Canada**

From the beginning, PIRGs in Canada set out on a different path from that of their US counterparts. American PIRGs are organized on a state level with small campus organizing offices and a main office usually in the state capital. This structure allows the PIRG to lobby for progressive legislative change, intervene in administrative hearings or take court action. Such a focus requires a large staff of professionals including lawyers, scientists, researchers and writers. This model is less relevant in the Canadian context with its parliamentary party system and less accessible court system.

A unique event strongly influenced the development of the PIRGs in Ontario. With the success at Waterloo, the PIRG idea was catching on and new chapters were being contemplated at a number of universities. Onto the scene appeared Ken Dryden, the Montreal Canadiens' goalie who had interned with Ralph Nader's Public Citizen organization while he was going to law school. Without consulting with either Waterloo or McMaster PIRGs, Dryden invited all student government presidents and their province-wide body, the Ontario Federation of Students, to a meeting at York University. There he outlined the PIRG model and called upon their support to organize a province-wide organization supported by a levy of ten dollars per student.

This well intentioned organizing effort immediately provoked a backlash from many student leaders whose own student governments were struggling to get by on student fees of less than one dollar per student. Any thoughts of organizing provincially along a US model had to be cast aside. Instead, PIRGs organized chapter by chapter with smaller fees than proposed by Dryden thus avoiding being perceived as a threat by the student union movement. Yet, debate continued about how the individual chapters in Ontario would work together.

PIRGs in Quebec organized individually and have taken advantage of their close proximity to work together on projects. PIRGs in British Columbia attempted to organize around a provincial model but the same strains of distance, local priorities and resources led to a similar structure found in the rest of Canada.

### **The Centralization Debate**

Despite this early political set-back, new chapters were organized at Guelph (1976), Trent University in Peterborough (1976), Western in London (1977), Windsor (1978), and Ottawa (1978). This rapid PIRG expansion, in the face of a growing conservatism in the country, was a notable accomplishment, but it strained the capacities of the organization as a whole and its members. Moreover, the anti-nuclear debate was heating up and the PIRGs were doing groundbreaking research on a wide range of other controversial issues including mercury poisoning, tenants' rights, asbestos, forestry and agriculture.

Staff spread out across the province were feeling isolated. Provincial meetings were held monthly, but travel expenses and time commitments were considerable for the large provincial board. A paper circulated by OPIRG staff David Robertson and Terry Moore in 1976 began the debate calling for the

restructuring of the organization more along the lines of the centralized US PIRG model.<sup>2</sup> The feeling was that the organization needed to combine its limited resources to take on the considerable power of government and multinational corporations. This was countered by a concern for the lack of grassroots control and opportunities for local student involvement.

In the end, a compromise prevailed which attempted to have it both ways with local and provincial offices.<sup>3</sup> However, the compromise depended on a good deal of further organizing and came at the cost of the loss of several good staff who felt they could not wait for the organization to grow to reach this vision.

The vision has not been realized. The provincial organization struggled along, underfunded and understaffed, trying to please everyone by trying to do everything. Attempts at agreeing on province-wide political campaigns for all chapters were largely unsuccessful. The strength of the organization continued to be realized at the community level.

Notes:

### **Who Is the ‘Public’?**

From the very beginning PIRGs have struggled with an overwhelming number of issues of public concern. How does a PIRG choose which issues to work on so that it can be effective with the resources that it has and not spread itself too thin? How does the provincial organization even begin to attempt to choose an issue that will be relevant to each of its PIRG members and their campuses and communities?

The differing priorities of students, staff and community members frequently result in a struggle for resources and energy. Different universities are influenced by different academic and corporate interests. Likewise the student body is made up of many class interests. The resulting tensions are reflected in the issues that are chosen by PIRG members and, in some cases, the issues that are avoided.

Sometimes these tensions manifest themselves between PIRGs. During the late 70s, for instance, OPIRG was a strong supporter of the anti-nuclear movement and the Peterborough chapter was the home of the magazine Birch Bark Alliance, later named the Nuclear Free Press, which promoted alternatives to nuclear power. Three chapters with pro-nuclear engineering faculty reacted strongly against PIRG’s involvement in the anti-nuclear campaigns of the day. Referenda were held against McMaster and Windsor PIRGs, forcing the two chapters to close. During the early 90s, an anti-meat article in OPIRG Ottawa’s newsletter was used to organize a refund drive by animal science students in Guelph.

The methods used at different chapters have at times been cause for dissension in the network. OPIRG Waterloo left the provincial organization in 1979, renaming itself WPIRG, partly over its assertion that OPIRG should focus on research and education and not on organizing and action. In particular, they were threatened by the activism of OPIRG Peterborough against nuclear power as they too had a strongly pro-nuclear engineering faculty. WPIRG has since rejoined the provincial organization, though it maintains its distinct name.

Conflicts are to be expected when issues of ‘public interest’ are addressed as there is no one ‘public’. Debates over competing interpretations of the public interest have been integral to the PIRG experience. For many PIRG members, this has not only led to a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of issues but has also highlighted the need for solidarity among PIRGs and activists.

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<sup>2</sup> David Robertson and Terry Moore, Public Interest Research: An Historical and Organizational Perspective, OPIRG 1st Annual Retreat (archived at WPIRG, Waterloo, Ontario: OPIRG, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> OPIRG Provincial Board Minutes 1976-79 archived at WPIRG, Waterloo, Ontario.



In the early '80s the Acid Rain Caravan was a very successful cross-border example of PIRGs uniting for a common cause. The tour circled southern Ontario and the northern border states, and raised awareness of acid rain effects ñ explaining to cottagers, for example, why fish were disappearing. But the strength of the Canadian PIRG model structure lies at the local level. Unlike the PIRGs in the US, Canadian PIRGs do not have strong provincial or national offices to organize larger scale campaigns.

### **Consensus Decision Making**

For many PIRG graduates, consensus decision making is synonymous with the PIRG experience. But this was not always the case. Early decision making followed very traditional voting procedures with winners and losers. It was not until the early '80s that the anti-nuclear movement and women's movement provided an alternative method of decision making that seemed to better support the PIRG model.

Consensus decision making is based on the premise that if a group with a 'basis of unity' or 'common cause' can reach consensus on a course of action, then their ability to achieve their goals will be improved. Consensus decision making is closer to the ideal of participatory democracy and it helps counter the development of hierarchical divisions in an organization. The process is educational and opinion forming as well as democratic.

In the early '80s OPIRG members discussed long and hard the pros and cons of changing the decision making structure. Most attractive was the proven experience of groups like the US anti-nuclear Clamshell Alliance and the Canadian Alliance for Non-Violent Action which had adopted the model for its strength and resistance to subversion. When the Alliance planned a mass sit-in at a nuclear facility all participants discussed and agreed to the scenario for occupation through consensus, even with hundreds of participants. When the police tried to arrest the 'leaders', hoping to undermine the occupation, they found that it did not dissolve in confusion because everyone was a 'leader'.<sup>4</sup> For women's groups, the consensus process was seen as more inclusive and worked to remove overt or hidden hierarchies that prevented full participation. For the young activist, the process allows for involvement while learning on the job.

Most concerns raised about consensus, when discussed by PIRGs provincially, revolved around what was tagged the 'bizarro scenario' or the 'tyranny of the minority'. This was where the whole group would be blocked by one or two members who would not agree to a course of action even after lengthy discussion and airing of alternatives. Most PIRGs dealt with this concern by developing by-laws or policies for the extreme instance when consensus could not be achieved to allow a vote to take place.

In the end, the Ontario PIRGs ironically 'voted' to convert to a consensus-based model. Consensus workshops are now standard practice at all PIRGs. Consensus decision making itself is self-correcting in design because it holds the seeds of empowerment within its process and as such has been an important development for youth activism.

### **The Importance of Staff**

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<sup>4</sup> V. Coover, E. Deacon, C. Esser and C. Moore, Resource Manual For a Living Revolution (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Press, 1978).

The fact that PIRGs are able to hire staff sets them apart from many volunteer organizations. PIRG staff have provided needed continuity for the organization. Activity does not stop for summer vacation and the organization does not shift its overall goals and strategies each semester or each year with the turnover in the student population. PIRG staff help implement the students' policies in an experienced, professional way, and in turn teach students research, advocacy and other skills.

In this way the process allows for the goals of the organization to outlive any one individual's participation. The work achieved on an issue is not lost when someone graduates. This has been very important for PIRGs in accommodating the normal turnover of students. You can't stop an incinerator or implement a recycling programme in one semester. You may not even do it within a four-year degree programme.

Tension may develop because staff are in a position to control information flow. They have more time to commit to the organization and their position and experience can be intimidating. At the same time, because student-run boards of directors are generally poorly equipped to fulfill their role as an employer, staff can feel insecure and threatened by arbitrary decisions that affect their jobs and livelihood.

Staff, with help from the board of directors, walk a fine line between playing a facilitating role and getting involved in issues and projects themselves. There are many benefits to having staff involved directly in issues. Certainly it adds to the credibility of the organization. This tension directly parallels that of the organization as a whole as it strives to be both a training ground and an activist organization.

In 1986, the staff of the Ontario PIRGs unionized with Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 1281 to formalize the relationship between student boards and their employees. It was also done out of a sense of solidarity with the union movement and had the full support of the student boards of directors. This process has been beneficial to both parties though it brings its own share of contradictions to be explored. Students learn the responsibilities and pressures for managing employees by being an employer.

### **The Latest Fork in the Road**

After many years of frustration with the role of the provincial office and the provincial co-ordinator, the office was closed and the co-ordinator laid off in 1994. The distance between PIRGs continues to be a problem along with the lack of resources to bring student activists together regularly. Pressures at each chapter and the differences between PIRGs and their campuses have worked against provincial organizing. Yet, despite the closing of the office, the provincial organization continued to perform vital functions. And, no one had abandoned the principle of working together.

What followed has been an interesting experiment in maintaining a network in a more decentralized way. Administrative functions were delegated to different PIRGs. The provincial role of providing training became a shared responsibility. A system to respond to and support new PIRG organizing was established. The effort truly reflected a commitment to the collective good of the network.

After a few years, PIRG staff in the various chapters recognized that they had found innovative ways to address many of the functions and roles of the provincial organization without the costs of a provincial office. Provincial functions each year are determined at the provincial annual general meeting, which board and staff members attend. However, planning for provincial activities is almost exclusively done at provincial staff meetings. Consequently student participation in the planning and implementation of provincial activities is reduced. Staff are meeting at least three times a year to share knowledge and resources, and plan for provincial activities. However, communication and networking between students of different PIRGs remains a challenge.

To remedy the lack of communication between students of different PIRGs, provincial funds have been allocated for 'networking meetings'. Working groups from any five chapters can apply for funding to hold such a meeting on their issue. Sometime in the future this may help working groups at different PIRGs to combine their resources, write grant applications and hire staff jointly to work on a provincial-level campaign. Perhaps this grassroots approach will provide the solution that has escaped the organization in the past.

In Quebec, a strong relationship has developed among the PIRGs in part because all three are located in Montreal. Several joint projects have been undertaken and twice yearly retreats allow all PIRG members to attend a training weekend outside Montreal. In BC, distance remains an isolating problem for Vancouver Island PIRG, Simon Fraser PIRG and Prince George PIRG; but, Simon Fraser PIRG was able to assist the development of Prince George PIRG at the new University of Northern British Columbia.

## **Making Change**

PIRG participants may take on issues that are campus-based, community-based or international in their scope. They may be active in a working group, hired for a specific project through a government grant programme, serve as a member of the board of directors, participate in research for credit programmes (where they receive course credit for work in the community), or network with other activists or groups in the community. They may be digging up information, developing popular education material, lobbying or getting dirty in a river. Regardless of the form, students are making changes in the communities where they have chosen to study.

PIRGs have stayed true to their vision. They have changed and adapted along the way to strengthen that vision. The greatest testament to their success is the fact that they still provide a place for students with idealism and energy to make a difference. Many graduates of PIRGs have moved into professional careers as teachers, lawyers, advisors to ministers and premiers, and city councillors. Many have been able to remain active in the grassroots social change movement as volunteers, supporters and (the lucky few) employees. Wherever they end up, PIRG alumni continue to make a difference in the communities they choose to make their home.

## **PIRG Power :PIRG profiles**

*David Ast Researcher*

A 1992 screening of the documentary Incident at Oglala, about the work of Native Activist Leonard Pelletier, inspired David Ast to "get down" with the Nova Scotia PIRG. His work with the Economic Justice Collective centred on opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement, and promotion of fair trade alternatives, including a campaign to encourage departments at Dalhousie University and citizens in Halifax to purchase Bridgehead Coffee.

Ast's activities led to the development of the "Just Coffee" campaign, which saw a percentage of all Bridgehead coffee sales go to support a rural women's health clinic in Esteli, Nicaragua. He also worked collectively on the creation of two magazines against both free trade and the G-7, educated voters the 1993 Federal election, helped to organize the People's Summit at the G-7 meeting in Halifax in 1995, and participated in a joint NSPIRG/CKDU radio sound project called 'neighbourhood noise', which dealt with local communities in Nova Scotia.

Ast is currently working through CUSO with the Association of Central American Campesino Organizations for Cooperation and Development in Managua, Nicaragua. His work is centred on policy development around local food security issues, and setting up a documentation centre with a focus on sustainable development, food security, gender and free trade.

NSPIRG gave David a number of valuable tools and skills, including the ability to use consensus-based decision making coupled with an understanding of the need for co-operation, respect and humour. His PIRG experience also afforded him the opportunity to work with an eclectic mixture of people and groups that worked on a wide range of issues, including homophobia, women's health and community organic gardening.

"In my experience," Ast says, "NSPIRG was not a dogmatic political organization - no one takes themselves too seriously even though they are contributing to significant social changes - we were having fun while at the same time being activists."

*Paul McKay Journalist*

Twenty years ago, Paul McKay became an OPIRG Peterborough board member, and from there he launched what became the Nuclear Free Press. Later, as provincial coordinator, he helped organize new OPIRG chapters at Carleton and the University of Toronto. He was instrumental in getting OPIRG to sponsor research for the book *Electric Empire* (a critique of Ontario Hydro), and the *Citizen's Guide to the Ontario Legislature*.

Since 1985, Paul has been an investigative reporter and author, writing exposes on failures in the workers' compensation system, business tax dodges, polluters, the nuclear arms trade, wildlife smuggling, a Nazi collaborator hiding in Canada, and organized crime. Currently he is developing a renewable energy project in Northern Ontario.

OPIRG helped Paul shape his values and sharpen his skills. It has also been the source of several strong, lasting friendships. "When I meet youth whose activism has been kick-started through OPIRG," he says, "I am usually amazed, impressed and relieved! The spirit still shines."

*Nandita Sharma Community activist and PhD candidate*

With her experience in the women's and anti-racism movements, Nandita Sharma was hired by the Simon Fraser PIRG to help co-ordinate the second edition of the British Columbia and Yukon Women's Resource Guide and asked to sit on the board of directors and to help develop a strategy to make SF PIRG more accessible and responsible to aboriginal students, students of colour, women, lesbians, gays and bisexuals.

Later Sharma chaired the Immigrants Refugees and Migrant Workers Rights Committee for the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). She also co-chaired NAC's Priority Campaign Committee, organized two national days of action against Immigration Canada's \$975 Head Tax, was one of four national coordinators of the Women's March Against Poverty, and helped organized the Second International Women's Conference Against APEC.

Sharma is currently helping to found a new organization called Southern Women Living In The North (SIN) The organization is seeking to bring greater attention to the shared colonial history of Southern women and aboriginals living in the North. But she is still an activist. She is currently a student in Sociology and Equity Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto), where she is examining Canada's migrant workers programme.

One lesson that Nandita cherishes from her PIRG experience is that oppression cuts across peoples' lives in a diversity of ways. Working with people whose activism was just budding at SF PIRG also gave Nandita the opportunity to keep things in perspective, "It is easy to forget sometimes what the non-converted are thinking." she says.

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