

Bringing student concerns to Ottawa

CASA lobby conference sees over 50 delegates take part in 115 meetings with MPs and other government officials

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The Cord (Wilfrid Laurier)

November 23, 2011

Last week over 50 students descended on Parliament Hill. But not for a tour, or even a protest.

These students gathered in Ottawa as part of the Canadian Alliance of Student Association's (CASA) annual lobby conference, taking part in 115 meetings with members of parliament and other staff of the federal government.

"Every year we have an advocacy week," said CASA national director Zach Dayler. "We bring our members, so the delegates that sit around the table, to Ottawa and stand in front of the MP or the Senator, the decision maker, to go through our priorities for the year and to lobby on those points."

The delegates at the lobby conference, which according to Dayler totaled at about 50-55, came from CASA's 26 member student associations and students' unions, which come from post-secondary institutions across Canada.

The issues the students discussed in their meetings with politicians were varied. According to Dayler, some of the topics included removing parental income contributions and the \$5,000 vehicle limit in the Canada Student Loan program, removing the two per cent cap on the post-secondary students support programs and making things easier for international students to not only come to Canada by eliminating the \$150 application fee for international students, as well as granting multi-entrance visas.

"Most of those [would be] wins that we hope to see this year, if not into the coming years that will make the lives of students just a little bit easier," said Dayler. "That's really the goal of it, just to try and fix what we can in the system."

However, with the Conservative party winning a majority government in May's federal election, lobbying has changed.

"What I found this year was that it's a little harder to lobby a majority government," said Jon Pryce, one of the delegates who attended the conference representing the Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union.

"We've really realized this year that the Conservative really has their own agenda

and they're plowing it through government, plowing it through the parliamentary process to the point where they're cutting down discussion and the democratic integrity of the whole process is undermined, so as a student lobby organization that represents 320,000 students across 26 schools, it makes it really hard to say, 'we need to focus on education, we need this amount of money to put towards it.'"

According to Pryce, the majority of Liberal and NDP MPs the delegates met with were completely supportive. However, he also acknowledged that the challenge is that for one of those opposition representatives to present a private members bill based on post-secondary education they would first have to be randomly selected to speak in the house, and would also likely be receiving pressure from other lobbyists representing other causes, such as environmental initiatives.

But the majority government isn't the only thing making lobbying for spending on post-secondary education more difficult.

"We've got a majority government and an economic problem so the government's going to be focusing on jobs and economic growth, as much as I hate to use those buzz words," said Pryce. "

"We were trying to say 'if we educate our population, that's what going to get us out of this economic problem' it's a long-term thing, it's not one of these things that can be fixed overnight, we have to address it now and it'll really be beneficial in the next 15 years."

This meant the delegates had to settle on what Pryce called "little victories," which were mainly non-monetary issues that most MPs were supportive of.

Despite the challenges, both Pryce and Dayler spoke of the lobby conference as a positive step for post-secondary education in Canada.

"Whether it's building an opportunity for further discussion with an MP and giving them the opportunity for to bring the issues up with their colleagues, so when we meet with a cabinet minister, we hope that that conversations will carry through into the cabinet meetings," said Dayler.

"We were able to voice student concerns over a number of different platforms and really come away with a feeling that, although they might not take some of the bigger things we wanted to happen, they'll still take some of the smaller things and that's still a step forward," added Pryce. "It really is hard to tell because policy takes so long to enact and the benefits of policy are so far in the future, to the point where we won't know if our lobbying efforts were decent until a few months down the road."