

Hipster-izing democracy

>> **Local organization Apathy Is Boring celebrates three years of trying to reach the youth vote**



DEMOCRACY IS COOL: Dougherty

MICHAEL-OLIVER HARDING

On January 29, political junkies from coast to coast experienced a surge in blood pressure watching the Conservative party's unforeseen TV attack ads: it signalled the dawn of a new campaign season. But while zealous pollsters and pundits revel in the thought of chronicling every moment of a soon-to-be

election, one demographic group doesn't seem to heed the calculated photo-ops, stuffy rhetoric or the act of voting itself: youth.

Iлона Dougherty, executive director of the national non-partisan and non-governmental organization (NGO) Apathy Is Boring, knows this all too well. The Montreal-based group will bring together politicians, musicians and youth for what it calls a "social experiment in direct democracy" this Saturday to celebrate its third anniversary and launch its revamped Web site.

After an abysmal youth voter turnout in the 2000 federal elections (a pitiful 25 per cent cast their ballots, according to Elections Canada), dance choreographer and longtime activist Dougherty felt compelled to rouse young adults from their lethargy. Fed up with the one-dimensional and ineffective campaigns targeting the youth vote, Dougherty and two artistically inclined friends founded Apathy Is Boring in January 2004. The organization uses art, media and technology to adapt the rehearsed Parliament Hill verbiage into straightforward talk that's more likely to resonate with the young'uns.

"Youth just want their politicians to be real and honest about why they're making certain decisions and the limitations of their position," says Dougherty. "I think young people have a really good bullshit detector, so the empty promises, lies and sales pitches will quickly fall flat."

Tools for change

Among the organization's educational weapons of choice are two design-savvy Web sites—www.apathyisboring.com and www.youthfriendly.com, the latter of which teaches organizations who work with youth how to build durable "intergenerational partnerships"—as well as edgy public service announcements, civic duty concert series and a clothing line that combines fashion with political messages to bring some much-needed sex appeal and irreverence to the democratic process.

The overwhelming support of Canadian musicians like Tiga, Sarah McLachlan, Skratch Bastid and Buck 65 has also been instrumental in obtaining precious media coverage and tweaking youth interest. Dougherty sees Apathy as an entry point for dispassionate youth, who may or may not find an incentive to vote after perusing the site. "We can't claim to be the whole solution, but we're able to reach out to a bunch of kids that other activists haven't been able to," she says.

Injecting new life into the idea of voting and politics remains a daunting task, but there have been signs that youth can be reached (Elections Canada's estimated turnout for eligible 18- to 21 1/2-year-olds was 39 per cent in 2004, and although no breakdown by age group has been released for 2006, the overall increase in voter turnout suggests that youth participation was also up). "In a lot of ways," says Dougherty, "we're comfortable and content with what's been established—our programs and resources, and the amount of volunteers we can rely on. But I don't think there really exists such a thing as comfort in the land of NGOs."

With a federal election perhaps on its way, Dougherty feels the time is ripe to unveil Apathy's spanking new Web site. The redesigned bilingual project is positioning itself to become an online community for young politically minded folk who wish to take part in an interactive experience. By creating an individual profile, the user can draft petitions, view and post multimedia content and drop a line to their elected MP, among other things.

Politics meets music

Saturday's event kicks off with a panel hosted by MuchMusic VJ Hannah Simone, featuring musicians who don't shy away from tackling political matters. The discussion will then give way to a pan-Canadian bill of performers, including West Coast MC Moka Only, soulful singer Zaki Ibrahim and two thirds of Toronto electro act Fritz Helder & the Phantoms. All key political parties have also confirmed their presence, and the event will grant each politician about two minutes to address the crowd during a musical interlude. "We've invited every single party registered in Canada, so it should be a pretty dynamic event."

But invited (and paying) guests take note: It will be neither the time nor the place to spew party rhetoric. "We don't want to give politicians too much time to speak," says Dougherty. "That's not the point. We just want them to be there, in the same room as the youth. That's the most important part of an event like this."

**Saturday, Feb. 17, at Club Soda (1225 St-Laurent, \$15).
Doors open at 7:30 p.m., panel at 8 p.m. and music at 9:15 p.m.**

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