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From Boardroom to the Backstage - An interview with Ilona Dougherty

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Ilona Dougherty is a long-time member of the Sierra Youth Coalition (SYC), a co-founder of the Youth Environmental Network (YEN), and the director of Apathy Is Boring (A is B). Tim Murphy spoke with her in the A is B office in Montreal.

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I've caught a ride with her from the SYC office in Ottawa to Montreal. I've caught glimpses of her in the midst of a downward dog at the yoga studio of which we both are members. I've caught her name in the media. I've caught her leading a workshop on her other passion – dance. I guess I've long felt like I knew Ilona Dougherty without ever really knowing her, and so I was happy to have finally caught up with her earlier this month for a little one on one.

Who is Ilona Dougherty?

Well, I grew up in Yukon and started environmental activism at 14. Yukon is very small:, 25,000 people. I was always hyper-involved, heavily involved in the arts and activism community. Both of my parents were quite involved in the activist community. My dad was president of Development and Peace. There was no real turning point which led me to activism; I kind of just grew up in it. I had people in my life at an

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early age who were activists. Maybe the turning point was when I realized that it wasn't only activism that I was interested in. I realized art was something that I wanted to integrate into what I was doing. I started framing my activist identity.

The first person I met was Amelia Clarke founder of SYC. She was a big mentor and a huge reason for my involvement. We spent 10 years on boards together. I co-chaired the Canadian Environment Network Youth Caucus and got involved in two major national projects: Earth Summit + 5 and Habitat II. In 1998, I participated in the commission on Sustainable Development and then moved to Ottawa to take a job with the CEN as the national caucus coordinator. I was living at Elizabeth May's house and there has always been a myth that I was an SYC intern during that time, but the truth is I never did work for SYC. I did put in many volunteer hours for Amelia and eventually finagled my way into being the Yukon rep on the SYC executive committee. I sat on the excomm up until 2001.

How did SYC help shape who you are today? What was the extent of your involvement?

I learned a lot about running an NGO. I was very hands-on in the management, particularly after Amelia left, how to run things, strategic planning, funder relations, WTO stuff, the trade train, FTAA. It was such a diverse experience. I met a lot of people through SYC.

How did Apathy Is Boring first come to be?

A is B started in 2004, towards the end of my work with Sierra Club. Paul Shore, Mackenzie Duncan and myself sought to link art and activism as a way that did not preach to the converted. I saw this as a huge failing of the activist work I'd been involved in up until that point.

Oh yes, and for the record, what is Apathy Is Boring?

Essentially, A is B is a national non-partisan group seeking to engage young people in the democratic process through art, media and technology. We throw concerts, maintain a website, manage a clothing line, offer consulting services (a youth friendly guide) and get involved in election campaigns.

In his essay *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell writes that: 'In our age there is no such thing as "keeping out of politics." All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer.' With this in mind and the requisite formalities out of the way, I dive into the world of high brow soap opera: politics.

Arundhati Roy Talks about the NGO-ization of civil society. She claims that NGOs are complicit in governments' abdication of responsibilities towards the people they were elected to serve. In your opinion, what roles do NGOs and activists play in the political process?

NGOs provide an active opposition, pushing boundaries and asking questions. I think that NGO's could do better if we didn't just do what has always been done. The way we find money is problematic. What if, instead of spending time finding money, we were actually broadening the community, to get beyond NGO-ization we must push boundaries and be critical of how we do the work we do.

How do you answer those who say there's no point in voting since all political parties are more or less the same?

I say, I totally agree. Since starting A is B, I've become more cynical about politics and see less and less reason why I should be doing what I'm doing. I've done the protest thing, done it since I was 4. I've also sat on the

inside, on the government side. I think that every single side has to be done. If only 30% of my generation is voting, we are not seeing, in front of our eyes, a tool that can be used to our advantage. Political inaction is a choice and sends a message. I think that, as long as we all participate in a critical dialogue and find ways to make things better, then that's alright.

Strategic voting: yes or no?

If everyone voted, it wouldn't be an issue. The issue is that only 64% voted in the last election; if everyone had voted with their conscious, but voted, there would have been a different result. I don't think it strategic voting works because you can never guess where everyone else is going to place their vote. It's not who is in government, but about good government.

What political leaders inspire you the most?

Women – women in politics inspire me. Politics is very much a 24/7 game. You have to live an unsustainable life. It's still an old boys club. Women have a rough time, the names they get called, the barriers they face on such a superficial level, not to mention the more substantial barriers that still exist.

Since this is for an SYC newsletter, I must ask what you think of Elizabeth May, the politician?

The more party leaders we know, the more involved they can be in our work. I think it's a different way for her to get her message across. She is going to face some really big challenges, she already has. I'm curious to see how she responds.

Do you think she can succeed in stepping above the party fray, the mudslinging and back room politicking and truly bring honesty to parliament?

I don't know; it's a hard line. Nobody should be fooled that one party different from the other.

How do you justify using sex appeal and celebrity to sell political participation?

The problem is when it becomes all glamour and no substance. That's why some of the campaigns in the US didn't work – they forgot to address real issues – policy change. I am the biggest policy geek besides maybe my boyfriend. I'm not just interested in making the political process sexy; I'm interested in making politics relevant.

I've been asked to consult celebrities on what causes to get involved in. It's about having a dialogue with these people, helping them go through a process of self-reflection. For example, Sam Roberts, a new dad, just saw End Of Suburbia, he wants to explore ways to to make our cities more sustainable places to live. That is interesting to me.

It's about creating a dialogue with artists and giving them an opportunity to talk about their views.

Who do you choose who to associate with and how do you meet these people anyways?

We look for artists with a high level of profile, but who also are thinking about this stuff. How do we find them? Well, being in the media helps, concerts help. Going to shows, getting to know their friends, finding out what cause they're into, sending them an article. They're more accessible than you think.

What form could proportional representation take here in Canada?

I actually think that a dialogue about the structure of democracy is what's most important; we just need to remember that democracy is something that should forever be evolving.

Ever consider going into politics yourself?

Yes, I think I would, probably territorial politics.

Do you think political office is the right place for youth?

Yes, but there needs to be a lot more rules on how to play the game. It's not about age, but about support. Youth candidates need resources and tools so that they are not put in a lose-lose situation. Very often it becomes tokenism. Often young people get placed in a riding where they can never win, without financial or moral support.

My interview with Ilona done with, I make my way down to the lobby from Apathy Is Boring's fourth floor, loft-style office. Although I am cutting it close to my next appointment, I take a seat on a stool at the counter of the building's in-house luncheonette. Nouri's, I think it's called. I order the veggie omelet and pull out my book. Nouri quietly goes about preparing my meal, as I quietly go about reading my latest non-fiction "the world is fucked/save the world" library loan. My eyes lift up from the pages to spot the Kraft cheese slice he pulls from the fridge.

"Feeding the Future," says Nouri as he glances at the cover while setting down a plate of hot food in front of me.

"What's that about?"

I explain that it is a collection of essays on a variety of food issues ranging from genetic engineering, meat production, the state of the fisheries, corporate control of agriculture and more. He asks me if I've read *Fast Food Nation*. I say yes. I tell him that it is a sort of visceral reaction to franchised foods that likely led me to choose his greasy spoon over another, such as, let's say, McDonald's. He talks about the difficulties in competing with the familiarity and notoriety of the McDonald's brand.

"When people see the Golden Arches they know they can order a hamburger and be fairly sure of what it will taste like, that it will taste good. People don't know my food, it's a risk. I couldn't survive out there off the highway, next to a McDonald's, I need my loyal base of clients."

I finish off my breakfast, leave some money on the counter and throw on my

coat as Harry gets busy in the kitchen serving up another order. Nouri is not Sam Roberts, but he is celebrity in his own right. On the flip side, speaking with Nouri was not preaching to the converted; still, he had lots to say. He is not apathetic. He is not boring.

For more information be sure to visit www.apathyisboring.com