

FORWARD MONTANA

Is It Possible to Get Excited About Politics?

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Student Opposition to Regent Widespread *5% of Montana Students have called for New Leadership*

A coalition of students from across Montana today demonstrated the wide support for new student representation on Montana's Board of Regents. The students plan to show signatures from over 1,600 students to the Senate Committee responsible for the appointments. The numbers represent more than 5% of Montana enrollment, based on the most recent figures available online from the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education.

"Wherever we go, when we talk to students and they learn the facts, they have been interested in a change," said Matt Singer, a University of Montana student and Vice President of Forward Montana. "Students from all over this state have expressed concerns: concerns that Ms. French has displayed poor judgment, concerns that we're being ignored during all the political wrangling here in Helena, concerns that this appointment is simply too long."

Students raised as their most fundamental concern the length of Kala French's appointment. French was nominated to a three-year term by then-Governor Judy Martz. No other Student Regent has ever been nominated to a three-year term.

"This is a fundamental issue of student opportunity, accountability, and representation," according to Sheena Rice, a student from Montana State University in Bozeman. "For thirty years, the tradition has been to have single-year appointments. It is time to restore that tradition."

The students claimed widespread support from around the state, mentioning that students signing the petition hailed from 93 cities and towns in 45 counties across Montana.

"These students want to know that they get a say in who speaks for them," said Rice. "This is an expectation as old as our republic."

Sheena Rice grew up in Butte. She is a sophomore studying philosophy and political science at Montana State University. Matthew Singer grew up in Billings. He is a junior studying economics at The University of Montana.

Forward Montana is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to serving as the voice for young Montanans.

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County	# of Signatures	County	# of Signatures
Beaverhead	5	McCone	1
Bighorn	1	Meagher	1
Blaine	1	Mineral	2
Broadwater	2	Missoula	253
Cascade	33	Musselshell	2
Chouteau	2	Park	20
Custer	3	Phillips	3
Daniels	2	Pondera	3
Dawson	5	Powder River	1
Deer Lodge	6	Ravalli	23
Fergus	6	Richland	1
Flathead	44	Rosebud	2
Gallatin	222	Sanders	2
Glacier	5	Stillwater	3
Granite	1	Sweet Grass	1
Hill	17	Teton	2
Jefferson	3	Toole	4
Judith Basin	2	Treasure	1
Lake	7	Valley	4
Lewis and Clark	38	Wheatland	1
Lincoln	5	Yellowstone	75
Madison	7	Total	841



Regent to go before Senate committee

Print Page

By **BETSY COHEN** of the *Missoulian*

Montana State University student Kala French will be in the hot seat Friday when the Senate's State Administration Committee spends 45 minutes interviewing her to decide whether to confirm her appointment to the state Board of Regents.

Some Republican lawmakers believe French, along with Regent Mike Foster, were targeted for individual scrutiny because they're appointees of former Gov. Judy Martz, and because Democrats want to flex their muscles.

Democrats insist their motivation is simpler. A seat on the seven-member board, which oversees all of Montana's higher education, is a powerful position, they said, and each appointee up for confirmation should be interviewed one-on-one.

If the decision were left to the Associated Students of the University of Montana, French would be ousted from the position she was named to by Martz.

At a recent meeting, UM student government leaders voted against confirming the MSU student to a three-year term, claiming French's job as a researcher and registered lobbyist for the Montana Petroleum Marketers and Convenience Store Association is a conflict of interest.

In their deliberations, ASUM senators confessed they had not researched the special interest group and did not know its political platform, but nevertheless felt French should not be working on behalf of an organization they believe is connected to a larger industry alliance that has criticized UM's Environmental Studies Program.

French, however, has defended herself - and her part-time job - in the strongest of terms.

"It disgusts me that my confirmation is what ASUM is spending so much time on," French said. "It's far more important for me to help resolve issues in the university system, things like transferability of credits, barriers to access, reducing tuition and availability of programs.

"My job with Montana Petroleum Marketers and Convenience Store Association allows me to stay in Helena and work for those causes, which to me are issues worth going to battle over, and issues students should be coming out by the bus loads to battle for."

And French has her supporters.

Members and former members of UM's College Republicans have been closely watching the controversy and believe the student regent is being victimized for her Republican politics and industry affiliations, and is the target of a political smear campaign orchestrated by liberal UM groups such as MontPIRG, College Democrats and a community nonprofit called Forward Montana.

These groups are making a power play to promote their liberal ideologies, which were quashed under Republican Gov. Martz's tenure, said Tom Figarelle, former state chairman of the College Republicans, and Tyler Matthews, a UM freshman.

As proof, the students point to several ASUM senators who are active members in all or some of the liberal organizations. Six voting members of ASUM and its vice president are members of Forward Montana, which alleges to be a nonpartisan voice for young Montanans, ages 18 to 30, and which gathered more than 500 student signatures in a campus petition drive protesting French's appointment.

"In today's society, we think of nonpartisan as being objective or credible, but in reality, nonpartisan just means not of

tangents, there is no argument that French and her confirmation has sparked a debate beyond campus borders.

The petroleum marketers, for one, are stunned to be at the center of the storm.

Charges that they are tied to extractive industries are absurd, said Ronna Alexander, executive director of the organization and French's boss.

Alexander chastised UM student government leaders to do their homework before slinging accusations.

"We don't represent the drilling companies and the refineries or any entities like that. We represent the small independent business people who distribute fuel and retail fuel," Alexander said. "We don't have anything to do with taking it out of the ground. And in regards to the Environmental Studies curriculum, we have never been involved with any discussions regarding it."

"Our issues revolve around underground storage tanks and fuel taxes, not drilling on the Rocky Mountain Front," she said. "It annoys me that somehow we have been branded a Republican Party cause when our organization supports candidates from all political spectrums, and if our critics were to look at our contribution reports, we probably gave more money to the Democrats than to the Republicans."

The heated topic has even grabbed the attention of the Montana Commissioner of Higher Education Office, said Commissioner Sheila Stearns.

"My personal opinion is that this is not primarily about Kala French and her ability to be a regent," Stearns said. "This has more to do with being in the cross hairs of politics on many levels."

For some lawmakers in Helena, this issue is nothing but politics.

Looking at the Senate State Administration Committee's upcoming interview schedule, Sen. Bob Keenan, R-Bigfork, said he believes there is an overt agenda at work.

Of the five Martz appointees who have been segregated for one-on-one interviews and scrutiny, one is Regent Mike Foster. Another is French's father, Burl French, who was appointed by Martz to the state electrical board and is up for confirmation.

Burl French, who owns a company that sets up gas stations and car washes, will be interviewed Wednesday, and Kala French will be interviewed Friday.

The scheduling, Keenan said, is suspicious.

"I'm concerned about it. I'm concerned about how the schedule was put together," he said. "With the five Martz appointees all lined up at the end of the week, you can't help but think there is an agenda there."

"It doesn't look good."

But what bothers Keenan most is that the new lieutenant governor has not followed through on his pledge to regents that he would help French through the confirmation process and introduce her to senators.

"I confronted (John) Bohlinger on this, and he has been told by the governor to back off and stay neutral in this," Keenan said.

"We have a free-ranging border collie on the second floor, but when it comes to the lieutenant governor, he's prevented from stepping up to his promise to help Kala French through the process," Keenan said. "John Bohlinger isn't speechless very often, but when I asked him about the situation, he was muzzled."

"He couldn't respond."

When asked about the alleged conversation, Schweitzer said he and Bohlinger believe the confirmation process is a Senate issue, not an executive concern. Schweitzer said in general he believes it is unethical for a person who is a registered lobbyist to serve on a state board or commission.

Gerik Kransky
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February 10, 2005

Kala French, Student Regent
Montana University System
c/o: Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620-3101

Ms. Kala French:

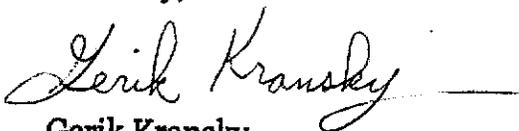
As I am sure you are aware, a vast number of concerns regarding your handling of the student regent position have surfaced. These concerns have come from elected student leaders, the Governor of Montana, the *Montana Kaimin*, and from Forward Montana, on whose behalf I write today. In addition to concerns regarding your handling of duties as student regent, elected officials in the State of Montana have raised concerns regarding the length of your appointment. Please accept this opportunity to resign from the position of student regent.

These concerns range from the fact that you have registered to lobby for the Petroleum Marketers Association to the extraordinarily long duration of your appointment. These conflicts have sparked intense in-fighting between campuses and partisanship in the halls of the Montana Capitol. I think we can both agree that all of this fighting is not good for students.

Additionally, the level of division your appointment has sparked will make your job nearly impossible. Even if you are confirmed by the senate, your tenure on the regents is likely to be marked by venom and division.

Still, there is a method that could be used to avoid these problems. Alone of all the people engaged in this fight, you have the power to avoid a turbulent term on the Board of Regents. By tendering your resignation now for a single-year term, you could avoid the concerns that have been raised by leaders in the Montana Senate. And our organization and the students we represent would be more than happy to accept a single-year term as a fair compromise. Such a term would also allow you to reapply, seek support from students, and potentially earn reappointment to the Board. Please resign from the position of student regent, for the good of The Montana University System.

Sincerely,



Gerik Kransky
President, Forward Montana

Cc: Petroleum Marketers Association

Party politics are not directing the regents' confirmation process; that Kala French has been segregated from the pack for interviews is testimony to the importance and impact of the job, said State Sen. Mike Cooney, D-Helena, the member of the Senate State Administration Committee who made the request to have French and Foster segregated for interviews.

"With only seven members to make decisions for higher education, the position of regent is very powerful," Cooney said. "There is no other motivation at work here, other than to better understand the philosophy of these individuals."

That French and her father are both scheduled for interviews comes as a surprise, he said, and is pure coincidence.

Cooney said he personally is not bothered by French's Helena employment, but he is not supportive of confirming the student to a three-year post, as appointed by Martz.

"Gov. Martz appointed Kala to a three-year position, and I don't believe that is an appropriate appointment," he said. "I believe more students should be given the opportunity to be a regent because it's a good learning experience and it's important to have new blood flowing through the board."

Currently, tenure for the student regent varies from one year to four years, depending on the governor's appointment. Cooney said he'll advocate to permanently change the position to a one-year, possibly a two-year, term.

After Friday's interview, the committee will vote on French's confirmation, then write a resolution that will go before the full Senate in the next few weeks.

French said she hasn't let the firestorm surrounding her position distract from her work.

"I am proud of my track record, and I encourage students to take a good hard look at it," French said. "I think it would be a great disservice for my work to abruptly end."

"There is a litany of issues and projects I have been working on and all of that effort would be lost, and not just my work, but the work of student leaders across the state. Every day, students have called and asked questions, who needed help with research and who I have dutifully represented at the Board of Regents."

Of this week's interview, French said: "I'm actually looking forward to it. It will be my first opportunity for these questions and concerns to be heard in a public setting."

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political affiliation - but you can still be overtly political," Figarelle said. "I think that's what MontPIRG and Forward Montana has done."

"In reality, they are nothing more than a Democratic pit bull as far as I'm concerned," he said. "And they are using their political power to force their own issues into some sort of vacuum of change."

It is disingenuous for MontPIRG and Forward Montana to claim they are nonpartisan when there's clear cross-pollination of the group's liberal ideologies among ASUM senators who pushed the resolution protesting French's appointment, Figarelle said. And it's dishonest for ASUM senators to say their decisions do not represent the liberal groups they work for.

The senators' motivation? If French is booted from the board, the new student regent would be appointed by Gov. Brian Schweitzer, who likely is more sympathetic to their liberal causes, Matthews said.

"I don't know why our student government is taking a role in this issue when they are supposed to be representing students and not pushing party politics," Matthews said. "I don't see anyone raising a stink about Regent Mike Foster, who is a lobbyist for three hospitals."

Those allegedly behind the French conspiracy are outraged at the young Republicans' effort to drag them into the issue.

"When I go on to the Senate, I always put aside biases I have toward any groups," said Bryce Bennett, an ASUM senator. He admits that in his other duties as vice president of UM's College Democrats and a member of Forward Montana he's somewhat of a poster child for Figarelle's argument.

But despite his involvement with those groups, Bennett said, "when I'm on the Senate, I'm not a member of those groups, I'm just there to represent students the very best that I can."

At issue is not party politics or some kind of trumped-up vendetta against the Republican Party, claim MontPIRG and Forward Montana officials. While some ASUM senators are MontPIRG members, MontPIRG is not involved in the dust-up over French's confirmation, nor is it taking a stand on the issue, said Matt Leow, MontPIRG executive director.

MontPIRG focuses on consumer advocacy, consumer protection and environmental health issues - issues that don't always click with a conservative agenda, said Leow.

"The issues we happen to work on tend to be progressive issues," he said. "And the College Republicans happen to not like the work we do."

"This is all about Kala French, this is not about past conflicts," said Gerik Kransky, president of Forward Montana. "We don't think it's right for Kala to claim she is representing Montana students while she is taking a paycheck from the petroleum industry."

If there is a political vendetta afoot, Kransky said, it's drummed up by the Republicans. They are miffed because last year they missed the deadline to rename their conservative organization, Forward Montana, and the organization's name was swiped by Matt Singer, a former member of MontPIRG who is now vice president of Forward Montana.

"We reclaimed the name Forward Montana for young people because we were offended by what the former organizers were doing," Singer said. Before, when Figarelle was a lobbyist for the organization, Forward Montana filed as a 501(c)6, which is a nonprofit business, made up of mostly young conservatives who promoted corporate interests, industry and responsible natural resource management.

Now, the organization is listed as a 501(c)4, which is a nonprofit social welfare organization.

"We felt Forward Montana was inaccurate, dishonest and offensive because they represented themselves as a whole generation of people with a whole range of ideas, when by law they were listed as a business," Singer said.

"Our members now are from virtually every political party and they are involved with dozens of organizations in this state, and we work for the people who are interested in making Montana a better place to live and who aren't wearing partisan blinders," he said.

While the subject of Kala French can spark endless hours of finger-pointing and theories, and can lead down twisting