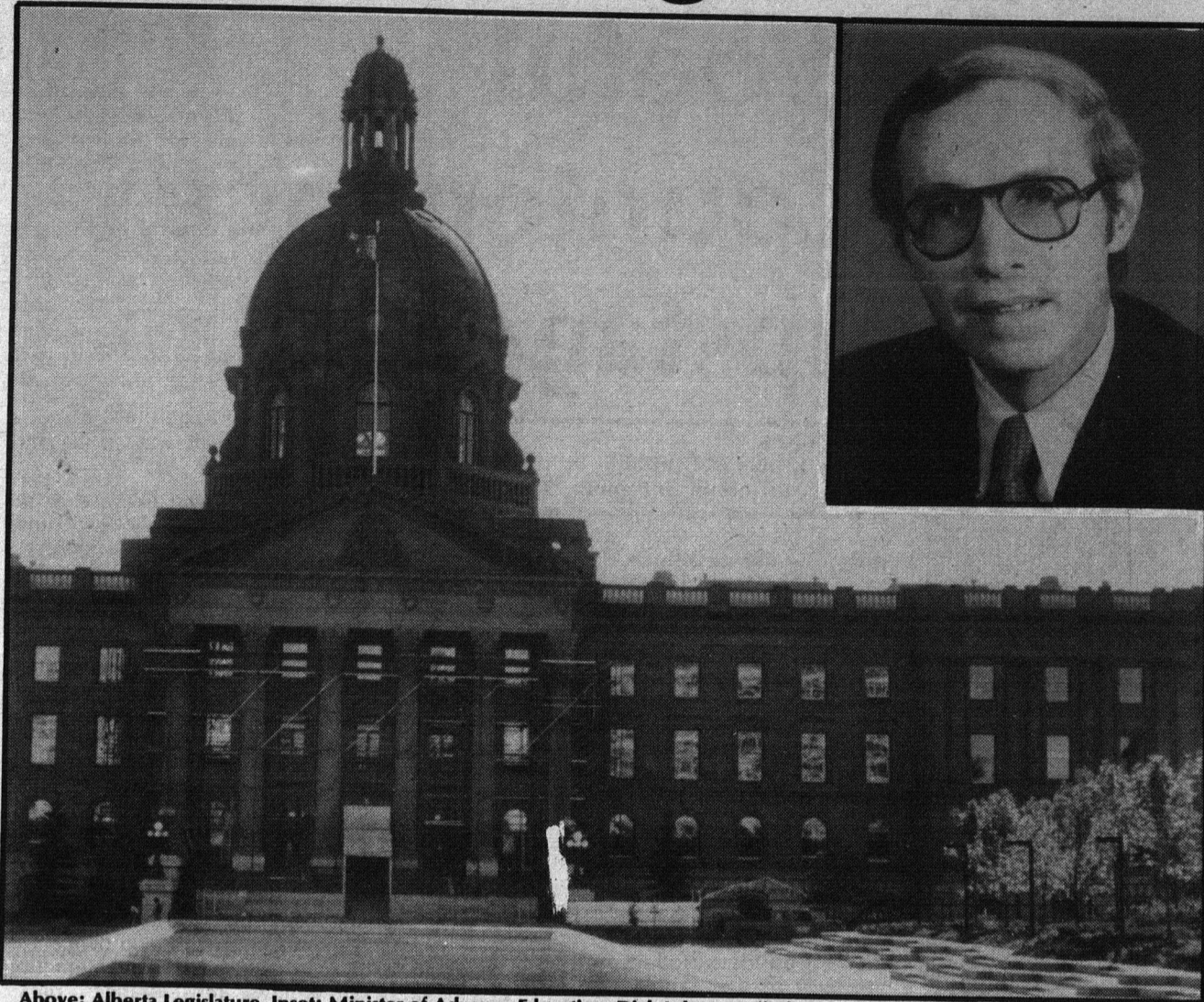


crowding is not government's fault"



Above: Alberta Legislature. Inset: Minister of Advance Education, Dick Johnston. "What are you going to march on?" said Johnston, alleging that certain SU groups are making issues out of non-issues.

can do. And once the new course is developed after two years it's out of my hands anyway, it goes into the base budget. It's transferred automatically. The only thing I can do in terms of new or innovative ideas is to say "Look, okay, a new course is going to go at the U of A" in this area. That's the only flexibility I have. All I'm saying is that I don't want to get into a debate with the Dean. He needs to shore up his own debating strengths within the institution in terms of the allocation of resources.

GATEWAY: Being in Advanced Education, you'll see that students are active . . .

JOHNSTON: They're not as active as when I was there . . .

GATEWAY: A different sort of activism . . .

JOHNSTON: Students are more concerned about getting an education and getting a job. They're more concerned to try to get through life with some reasonable security. When I was in university, you got a degree, you had a job the next day. MBA's, we'd have guys knocking on our door all the time.

GATEWAY: What would you think of a "March to the Legislature"?

JOHNSTON: What are you going to march on?

GATEWAY: Cutbacks.

JOHNSTON: There are no cutbacks so you can't march on that. We've never cutback in Advanced Education.

GATEWAY: Quotas.

JOHNSTON: There's always been quotas. Did you march in 1931 when we had a quota on medical school? There's always been quotas.

GATEWAY: So your reaction is that there aren't any issues. The Students' Union called a press conference in August, as you know, claiming that you weren't taking issues seriously.

JOHNSTON: The Students' Union was trying to defend their own position. Sixty per cent of the population - that is, their constituents - are out of work. They're (the SU) getting paid to sit over there and they had to appear to be doing something effective (for students). In fact, I think they had to have some guilt about collecting all those wages over the summer. I don't really think the SU represents the prevalent attitude (of U of A students) right now. And even the correspondence in your paper points that out.

GATEWAY: The SU claims you were inaccessible.

JOHNSTON: They better be more careful about that.

Of course, they waited until I was on holidays to cause the situation. But I'm not going to respond to that (press conference). It's a nominal issue. I'm not going to get caught up in that kind of a playoff. I don't have to.

GATEWAY: Do you take student groups seriously? The Canada Federation of Students, for example?

JOHNSTON: How many students in Alberta are members of that? If they say 'no' (to the October referendum), there'll be none. Students don't want them.

GATEWAY: How about CFS role in the changes to the Canadian Student Loan Program? They said the changes were "something we (CFS) can certainly claim victory for because we have been lobbying for it for a long time."

JOHNSTON: That's nonsense. What the federal government decided to do was that they wanted some profile with university students. So they said, "What can we do in this social envelope that we have." So what did they do? They took the money out of the transfers to the provinces which goes to universities under Established Programs Financing, and simply puffed it up here in a little fluff which had some appeal. I think Serge Joyal wanted to have some political attractiveness because he's got this big title - Secretary of State - he's trying to interfere with Advanced Education to some extent and he had nothing to do. All I'm saying is that I don't think they (CFS) affected it.

GATEWAY: A lot of people are interested in how you'll respond to these groups.

JOHNSTON: I'll listen to them and talk to them. I've never not talked to anybody.

GATEWAY: What would make you take more notice . . .

JOHNSTON: Of what?

GATEWAY: Of students.

JOHNSTON: I do take notice. You're assuming that I don't take notice and where do you get that information?

GATEWAY: From discussions with the Students' Union.

JOHNSTON: You only believe their point of view them?

GATEWAY: No.

JOHNSTON: Then ask me the question. Don't make that hypothesis - that's not fair.

GATEWAY: Well, you said earlier that the SU doesn't represent students.

JOHNSTON: Let's put it this way. I don't really think their concerns are reflective of the students' concerns. They're making issues out of non-issues. But I do think that there's concern among students about tuition fees, about job security, about over-crowding, about library space. And those are concerns that I share too. And they are shared and articulated by the SU groups. But a lot of the other issues that SU groups are trumping up, are just that. On the accessibility side, I think they've overblown our accessibility study. They're trying to blend into it more variables than in fact can be handled. I don't think that there's much evidence to support that universities are inaccessible. It's an issue that they like to play on or like to develop because it shows that the government is not responding or not allocating enough resources. Those are the typical kinds of conclusions that you come to and it's a spohistry debate.

GATEWAY: The SU intimated that you weren't happy with your portfolio.

JOHNSTON: Why? How did they come to that conclusion? I expected to be in Advanced Education. I was hoping for it. I requested it. So how can I not be happy? So their guess, or their rumour, or whatever it is, is entirely false. I remember when Jimmy Foster (a former Minister) had Advanced Education, we discussed the excitement, the potential, the real need to have an aggressive Advanced Education department. People want us now to be more oriented to the responsibilities within our jurisdiction. I spent the last four years fighting a war - the conflict of '81, Energy and Constitution. The Constitution in particular.

"I think they (SU Exec) had to have some guilt about collecting all those wages over the summer."

But I'm finished with that and it's time to get on with the jobs before us. One of the important things is education, clearly within our jurisdiction. And that's why I'm here.

GATEWAY: Earlier, you had no comment about that.

JOHNSTON: Well, I told you. I was not going to debate with the Students' Union through the newspapers. It was a spurious set of positions that they had. It's not for me to debate this. I'm not going to get into that kind of narrow, base, discussion. I just will not do it.

GATEWAY: What are you planning as a long-range plan? What is the government doing to break out of this recession?

JOHNSTON: Interestingly enough, there's my solution on that very issue. That's what I'm working on right this minute. (Johnston shows manuscripts).

GATEWAY: The Economic Report.

JOHNSTON: Right. Some interesting things emerge. Frankly, I think we have diversified our economy. Not substantially, not perhaps as much as we thought we could have when we undertook the venture in 1971. But diversified nonetheless. A number of areas: Petrochemicals, fully diversified at the tertiary level. In food processing, certainly more value-added in terms of the raw materials we're dealing with. And with petroleum, intellectual areas, computer areas, into high tech, finance, and commerce.

GATEWAY: What about students? What about something concrete?

JOHNSTON: We'll be developing high skill jobs here in Alberta, assuring that the pay-offs are here.

GATEWAY: What about creating a government department, like the Liberals are proposing, to help youth? It's received a good response from Trudeau and Lalonde.

JOHNSTON: They're socialists. I'm not. If you take that to its ultimate conclusion, then instead of being unemployed, you simply get a job in government. No more are you unemployed - the cost is roughly the same. That's those people who are gainfully employed in the private sector would have to pay enormous taxes to keep the cost of government operating. And that's absolutely fallacious. In the longer term, it'll drive the private sector out, it'll stultify investment, it'll defer people from going to work to make money because they can't afford the taxes. Expansion government is the last thing you want to do. The use of government tools is another thing again. In Alberta, we have a very substantial tool in the Heritage Savings Trust Fund. The Liberal Party typically comes up with funny proposals. To some extent Axworthy has been on the right track with this restraining.... Opportunities for retraining of sectors, particularly women in some stereotyped jobs. I have a special responsibility for the Status of Women. They're demanding equal opportunity in terms of making decisions at all levels... ▲