

# The MPHEC's identity crisis

by Ron Stang

What happens when the credibility of a body set up to represent a certain group's interests begins to be doubted by the people it represents?

In this case the body is the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) and the people it represents are the 17 universities and colleges in the Maritime region.

For the past three years the MPHEC has presented to the Maritime governments proposed operating budgets for post-secondary institutions and each time these proposals have been turned down.

This has led to public speculation about the effectiveness of the commission.

For the budget year 1977-78, the commission asked for 11.5%, the Council of Maritime Premiers, (CMP) granted 7%; in 78-79, it recommended 14%, approval was given for 6.7% plus regional adjustment; and, at a recent press conference, the CMP announced that for the 1979-80 budget year, it would allocate only 5.5%. The MPHEC had asked for 9.5%.

The proposed increases submitted by the MPHEC have been more than reasonable taking into account that governments are practicing spending restraints. As the commission's proposal for 1979-80 makes clear, the sum applied for is "intended to allow institutions to provide existing levels of service without further resource deterioration although it is considerably below the level of assistance requested by institutions after including an allowance for inflation."

Nevertheless, its proposals have been consecutively under cut by the provinces. The reason given—"spending restraints."

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the MPHEC was established in 1971 to function as a planning and advisory group for the Maritime governments.

A creature of the Council of Maritime Premiers (CMP), a political body set up by Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island to coordinate certain policy areas the three have in common, the commission's role is to act as a liason between colleges and universities and the governments. The commission submits proposals to government covering all facts of university operations, from requests for new academic programs to applications for financial assistance. (Governments pay all additional operating expenses over revenue derived from tuition fees and private grants).

As the MPHEC defines itself, its purpose is "to assist the province and the institutions in attaining a more efficient and effective utilization and allocation of resources in the field of higher education in the region."

The commission's role is one of intermediate status between the institutions and governments, taking on both a lobbying role on behalf of the former and the dispenser of policy for the latter.

## FINANCIAL PLANNING

The most important function of the MPHEC is financial planning for the Maritimes' 17 colleges and universities. Every autumn each of these educational institutions submits two budget proposals. One is immediate, pertaining to the institution's next budget year. The other is more long-term, outlining the institution's projected costs over the next three years.

The commission reaches an across-the-board

figure which is passed on to the provincial treasury boards. The boards are the final arbiters in deciding whether to accept or reject the commission's budget request.

The colleges and universities also submit their three year cost projections statements. In making their decisions on how much money to allocate for the next budget year, the treasuries take into consideration the institutions' long-term spending figures.

When the CMP decide to allocate less money than recommended by the MPHEC, the difference must be made up by the individual institutions. This is done either through increasing tuition fees, cutting back proposed or existing academic programs, or cutbacks in staff and capital projects such as new buildings and research equipment.

## TREADING THE FINE LINE

Over the past few years student federations and students councils in the Maritimes have time and

*Like previous reports of the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) this year's application for financial support to the Council of Maritime Premiers (CMP) speaks directly to the negative effects government restraint programs have had on the quality of education in the region's post-secondary educational institutions. Among the points it makes are these:*

•"Faculty salary levels at Maritime institutions are the lowest in Canada and in the past year they have had a further decline proportionally to the Canadian average. The continuing deterioration of faculty levels is having a negative effect upon this mobile resource as it appears to be contributing to the outflow of qualified faculty from the region."

•"As a result of the fiscal restraint environment, institutions have been undertaking only minimum equipment replacement and building repairs and maintenance. If this practice continues, not only will educational quality suffer but there will also be a depletion of the institutions' capital resources, all of which will be required in the future given present enrollment projection."

•"Research capabilities are directly related to the capability of faculty members and the relative decline in Maritime salary levels will result in a diminution of the quality of this resource at a time when it should be developing."

•"... the situation has reached the point where institutions face decisions of whether to take action that will result in further quality deterioration or to reduce program offerings. This places institutions in a dilemma since steps in either direction could result in students deciding to leave the region for post-secondary training."

again railed against the provinces cutbacks in education spending. These groups have argued that cutbacks can only lead to a decline in the "quality of education".

Although if they have perhaps been most outspoken, it hasn't only been student organizations upset and worried about such cutbacks. Also concerned have been the university administrators and last, but certainly not least, the MPHEC itself.

In fact, a survey of the commission's reports over the past few years reads like annual barometers indicating the increasingly desperate role the region's colleges and universities find themselves in. It's all there in black print. The reports state that with the highest costs and the lowest grant revenue in the country, the service provided by Maritime post-secondary educational institutions is deteriorating rapidly.

At the outset of the commission's latest report it says that government funding has reached such a low level it now is even less than the average restraint levels for other government services and departments.

Every year the commission has documented the ongoing plight of the regions post-secondary institution system, like indicating the last rise in the water level around a sinking ship. Yet each year the provinces apparently ignore the warnings and continue to allocate far less than what the institutions

need to survive.

The MPHEC must walk a tight rope between its role as representative of the interests of the post-secondary institutions and its role as government agent distributing policy guidelines and funding. It is this ambivalent position which has led to questions about its credibility.

During the past few years, various university administrators and student groups have speculated publicly that the MPHEC was not an effective lobbying group simply because it was an agent of the government. The commission was no longer regarded as an objective, impartial group. The commission came in for criticism when the government allocated less than the amount the MPHEC had requested.

Not the least of these sentiments was expressed by Dalhousie vice-president Guy MacLean recently in announcing his resignation from the commission. Said MacLean, "it makes me doubtful as to the use of the MPHEC if the government just goes ahead and applies to universities the guidelines of every other department."

## POLITICAL ROLE

It's important to note that the CMP's dealings with the region's post-secondary institutions through the MPHEC is not governed strictly by bureaucratic procedures. The premiers won't approve or disapprove budget requests based solely on whether a program is effective or not. What comes into play in this whole process of application and review is perhaps one overriding consideration—politics.

Because of its highly political nature, the CMP enacts policies—whether they be in education or in any other area of its jurisdiction—in a manner extremely sensitive to how they'll still be received by the public. Always in the back of the premiers' minds is their own personal vulnerability as elected leaders. If a policy is popular, it's a good bet it will be promoted by the politicians. If it isn't, to them it can be anathema.

In recent years public opinion in the Maritimes, like other regions in Canada, has been disapproving of government spending. The effect of this sentiment on government policy as it affects post-secondary education has become extremely clear. While the governments in the three provinces have curtailed spending in a number of administrative areas, the colleges and universities have been particularly hard hit.

