

# Higher education, lower priority

by Erin Goodman  
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**N**ovember at Dalhousie University in Halifax. An 18-day old faculty strike over monetary issues empties the campus and splits opinion. Fingers are pointed, blame is shifted.

Students resent their profs for "bumming out on them". Faculty resents administration. The administration points to systematic government underfunding of post-secondary education at a provincial level and pleads an inability to pay. The government says Dalhousie gets enough money and won't get another cent.

The strike only ends when the provincial government steps in to appoint an "Industrial Enquiry Commission". This is a surprise to students who have been told for weeks by faculty and administration that contract negotiations involve three steps; negotiation, conciliation and binding arbitration. Before now, the government has gone out of its way to avoid having any kind of connection to the strike.

Negotiations were carried on for months, since the faculty contract expired in June. They broke down. Conciliation is the next step, when the government reaches a helping hand to both parties by appointing a mediator. Conciliation produces nothing. A strike vote is called, and passes with a significant majority. Now the situation calls for binding arbitration, a process which is implemented when the sides can't agree on anything and an impartial panel is appointed to come up with a solution. Arbitration fails. Apparently nobody can be held accountable for Dalhousie's desperate financial situation. What now?

Students wait for administration to make an offer that faculty can accept. And then, something new. An Industrial Inquiry Com-

mission, appointed through the provincial department of labour, a message to faculty, administration, students and impartial taxpayers that The Government Has Stepped In. A step back from arbitration or a "more active form of mediation", which will air the grievances of both parties publicly before a settlement is reached.

Suddenly, a dispute which has dragged on for weeks is resolved over a weekend of negotiation. It was all over with little shouting. And the university community lived happily ever after.

The situation at Dalhousie opened the eyes of many students. Suddenly, it became clear that paying the highest tuition fees in Canada does not guarantee quality of education. That's an understatement. In fact, it became clear that nothing, or nobody, will guarantee quality of education in Nova Scotia; least of all the body which is entrusted to the task.

Many students in eastern Canada have never heard of the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, based in Fredericton, New Brunswick. This is the body entrusted to the task of preparing estimates on the costs of running post-secondary education in the maritime region, and making impartial requests to the provincial governments for subsidies on behalf of the institutions.

Every year since 1977, this group of government appointees has approached the governments of PEI, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia with funding recommendations to maintain the quality of PSE in the maritimes.

The recommendations may or may not be accepted by the respective governments. In either instance, the MPHEC is handed back an approved figure, which will be split among the 21 institutions under its jurisdiction by means of a "funding formula".

During the strike at Dalhousie, President Howard Clark pointed

a finger of blame at the MPHEC, citing inequities of the funding formula as a contributing factor to the financial crisis at his institution.

Meanwhile, student organizations charge that the existence of the MPHEC matters little to students on campuses throughout the maritimes. Until this year the presence of students on the 19-member board was denied. Now, two student appointees take part in the processings, forcing critics to re-examine past perceptions of the MPHEC.

## history

Per capita, there are more degree-granting institutions in the Atlantic Provinces than anywhere else in Canada, 21 in all, with about 28,000 students from a population of less than a million.

Until 1967, the federal government financed PSE by providing a direct per capita subsidy to the provinces, and the provinces divided up the money among the institutions on the basis of enrollment. In 1967, the Atlantic provinces were given the option of continuing a per capita arrangement, or entering into a 50-50 matching grants system with the federal government. Nova Scotia was the only province to opt for the matching system.

Although federal funding reduced some of the provincial burden for direct funding, the provincial higher education committees were able to assume more control in the decision-making process, as the provinces moved toward non-sectarian, public education. The institutions, meanwhile, remained autonomous entities. The institutions, meanwhile, remained autonomous entities, ultimately responsible through their charters to the legislatures of each province.

A regional approach to PSE began in 1964 with the formation of the Atlantic Association of Universities (AAU). The AAU began as a voluntary association among the presidents of a number of Atlantic institutions and had as its stated purpose "to assist the co-ordination of higher education, to ensure high academic standards in a period of rising costs and to avoid unnecessary duplication of faculties and courses of study".

The AAU soon favoured the idea of regional body with government sanction to deal with all aspects of common concern to the institutions and governments. By 1971, the maritime premier recognized that the regional overlap of PSE demanded consistent

attention, and solidified their cooperation with the creation of the Council of Maritime Premiers (CMP).

As Jeff Holmes, executive director of the AAU, stated, "The decision to launch the MPHEC was made by the premiers in the euphoria of their first meeting... the announcement took the Maritime premiers by surprise and created some consternation. The assumption had been that they would be consulted about the timing of such a move and the terms of reference of the commission."

The MPHEC was born.

## growth

The 70s saw a rapid growth in PSE, in terms of enrollment, physical expansion and government funding. The need for a regional coordinating body was pressing, and after months of delay, the MPHEC finally came together in 1974.

The idea was originally presented with much opposition; the provinces could not agree on a chairperson, the Nova Scotia education minister publicly opposed losing direct provincial control of post-secondary policy making, and the N.B. Acadian population feared the loss of their culture in the larger populace.

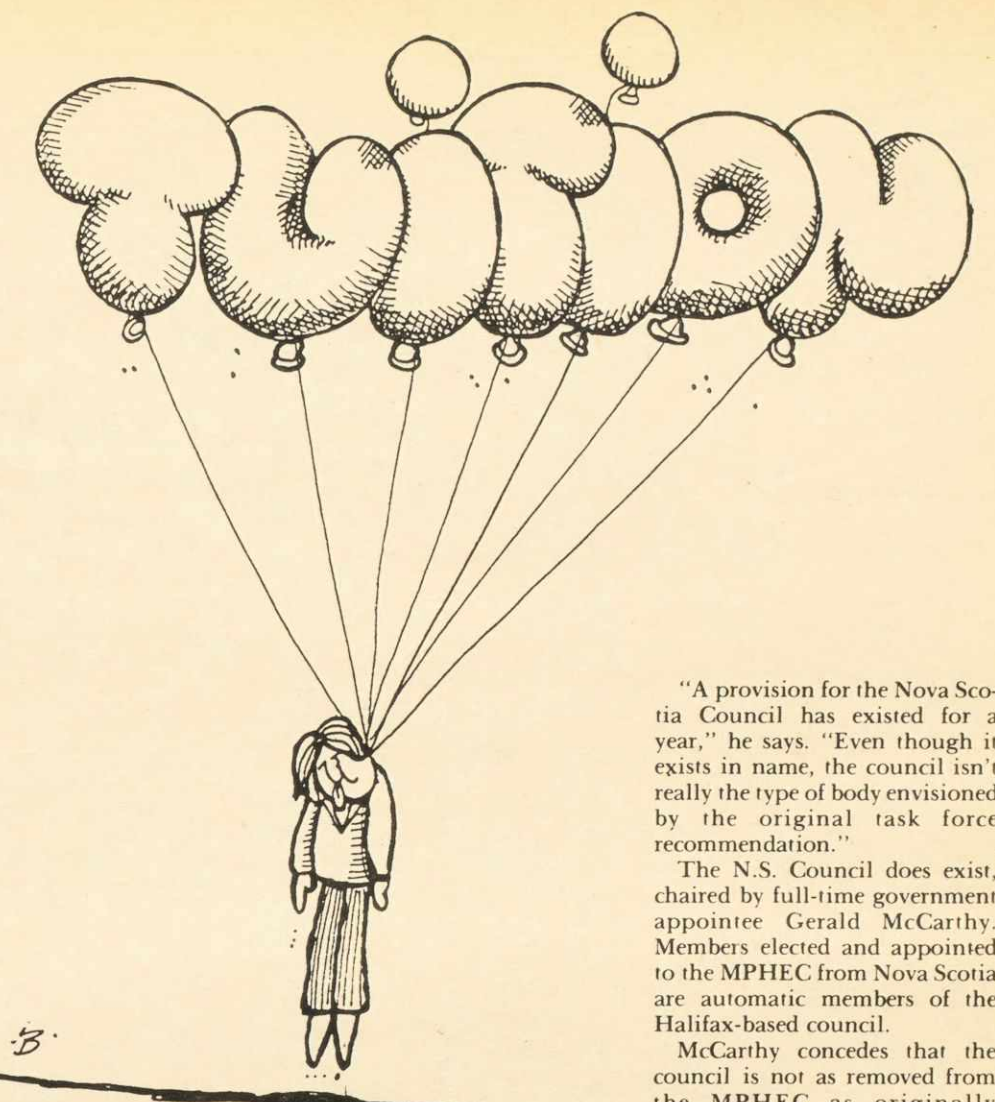
The fact that Nova Scotia did not whole-heartedly endorse the concept of regional decision-

The total figure is passed to regional provincial treasury boards which decide to either accept or reject the proposal — in case of rejection the government will produce a lower figure and pass it back to the MPHEC. The commission will take the preferred subsidy and allocate a certain amount to each institution through a formula based on enrollment and other factors.

The process seems fair. The commission members are in an admirable position to assess the development of PSE in the entire region. When the funding recommendations are accepted the commission commended; when the recommendations are rejected they are in no way accountable for the subsequent drop in the quality of PSE.

## change

The fact that the governments ignored students' demands for representation on the commission for ten years could be indicative of hidden agenda. Royden Trainor is one of two students who were invited to participate in the MPHEC as representatives of the public-at-large this year. The Dalhousie first-year law student says that part of the incentive for having no previous student representation on the board may stem from the fact that "you couldn't trust students to toe the provincial party line".



## nova scotia

The creation of a separate Nova Scotia Council of Higher Education was an indication that the MPHEC did not adequately serve the interests of the government of Nova Scotia. Complaints of the Nova Scotia government's consistent failure to meet the funding recommendations of the MPHEC were becoming an irritation and an embarrassment.

In 1984, all of the Maritime provinces approved a 6.2% increase in funding. The commission had originally called for an 8.4% increase for PEI, an 8.1% increase for New Brunswick, and a 9.2% increase for Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia falls the shortest of the recommendation, but at least the provinces were united in their rejection of adequate funding levels for PSE.

After 1984, Nova Scotia Premier John Buchanan finds himself pretty much alone in his severe underfunding of provincial post-secondary institutions. The following year, PEI meets the MPHEC recommendation, NB falls only 2% beneath it, and NS drops 1% beneath the funding recommendation.

In 1986-87, Nova Scotia falls a full 3% beneath the recommendation. Next year, New Brunswick actually surpasses the MPHEC recommendation while Nova Scotia falls 1.3% short of it. And this year, both NB and PEI met the recommendations, while Nova Scotia's increase of 6% was approximately 2% less than that recommended.

The creation of the Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education sent out a clear message to the critics — from now on Nova Scotia will take care of its own house, thank you.

But the wheels of bureaucracy turn slowly. Although Larry Durling, former chair of the MPHEC, recalls his initial expectation of a "shakeup" after the Royal Commission Report was published, it never materialized.

"A provision for the Nova Scotia Council has existed for a year," he says. "Even though it exists in name, the council isn't really the type of body envisioned by the original task force recommendation."

The N.S. Council does exist, chaired by full-time government appointee Gerald McCarthy. Members elected and appointed to the MPHEC from Nova Scotia are automatic members of the Halifax-based council.

McCarthy concedes that the council is not as removed from the MPHEC as originally intended by the Royal Commission Report, nor does it have executive powers over university affairs. Says McCarthy, "The Premier, I believe, has made it abundantly clear that it is not the intention of the council to weaken the MPHEC."

McCarthy can't make any predictions for the future direction of the council, saying, "We haven't yet come to any specific conclusions." Meanwhile, Nova Scotia's position on the MPHEC has been strengthened. In 1987 a decision was made to increase the size of the commission by four members, providing three additional members from Nova Scotia and one from New Brunswick.

## future

A new report from the Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU), points out some frightening facts.

In the past decade, Nova Scotia institutions have suffered a 20 per cent decline in government funding. Meanwhile, full-time enrollment at Maritime universities has increased by 37 per cent.

Despite this sharp decline in government support for post-secondary institutions, provincial support for schools and hospitals has continued to rise. (45 per cent for hospitals since 1979-80, 24 per cent for public schools when expressed in constant dollars on a per student basis). Who will teach in the schools and work within the health professions as our universities continue to decline?

These statistics are a clear indication of the comparatively low priority that Maritime governments have attached to providing adequate levels of support to post-secondary education. The faculty strike at Dalhousie is a clear indication of Premier John Buchanan's unwillingness to keep the "flagship of the Maritimes" afloat by accepting the funding recommendations of the MPHEC.

Who will stem the tide?



Roland Thornhill and Premier John Buchanan. Two Nova Scotia big wigs deep in thought. What are they thinking of? Obviously not Post Secondary Education.

Photo: Russ Adams