

Dick Johnston interview: "Overcrow"

Gateway Editor Brent Jang interviewed Dick Johnston on Thursday in his office at the Alberta Legislature. The Students' Union executive has criticized Johnston, the Minister of Advanced Education, for being inaccessible.

GATEWAY: The U of A's enrolment went up 9 per cent. The sheer numbers increase would make it necessary to change the formula in the enrolment-based transfer of the universities. Right?

JOHNSTON: I wouldn't change the base-budget. But in the transfers, what I call term-certain-money (enrolment-based funding) . . . if the numbers are fairly dramatic and there is evidence to believe that they are (dramatic), I'm going to consider additional funding for more students. But I haven't reached a conclusion on that. It's going to require discussion at the Cabinet level to decide if in fact it's reasonable in light of our financial circumstances.

GATEWAY: Are high tuition fees making university unaccessible? That is, only those who can afford to pay, get in?

JOHNSTON: I think if you want to go to university you have the opportunity because of the combination of the Heritage Fund, of scholarships and very lucrative student loans with remissions. It's quite possible to go to university. The other problem that we're facing however, is sheer size of institutions. That may be a difficult one for us in the future, where in fact, you can't get into the U of A because the numbers are too big, then what'll we do?

GATEWAY: Then what you do is raise entrance requirements from 60 to 65 per cent. This move is necessary because of lack of government funding.

JOHNSTON: That's not true. It's not a question of lack of government funding. It's a question of what is the size of the U of A. The amount of money now invested in Advanced Education institutions is \$3 billion. If we want to put another \$3 billion in Advanced Education facilities, you ask yourself what is going to happen to student numbers? What happens if they tail off again? We end up with overbuilt capacity, expensive operating costs, and really not a strong demand on the student side. I think the U of A can cope with 25,000 and their own internal studies have shown that they can cope with 25,000. But beyond that, we may have to say that the University impose other restrictions so that it stays at that level. That means that students will then have to go to the University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge, stay out for a year, or go elsewhere. Those are some of the hard, difficult issues that I have to deal with next year.

GATEWAY: The Department of Computing Science has a 36 per cent increase in course registrations. What changes can you make to the budget to alleviate problems with overcrowding?

JOHNSTON: It's only in an exceptional case that I can arrange with the Board of Governors to provide special funding or to provide funding that flows through to the Faculty. Because that's done on an internal, competitive, bidding basis. And that allocation is in place. My responsibility is essentially on two areas: one, to provide the bulk of the financing for the university — what we call our base-grant basis, and secondly, to provide funding for new course development. So really, my only flexibility is on the new course development side.

"I think the U of A can cope with 25,000 (students)."

... What we'll have to do is find some additional money for computing science. And that's one of the things I'm working on is to do an internal allocation on my own department, make a presentation to the Board of Governors, and in that presentation, I'd say, "Look, I have some additional money. Will this assist you, say, in the next intake of students, perhaps January of 1984?" And then try to find additional money for it subsequently. It's something that's important. It's where the student demand is. It's not so much a question of hardware, mostly it's a question of finding teaching facilities. So it's a shared view, it's a shared objective. I'm trying to find a way to cope with it right away.

GATEWAY: How do you see Advanced Education fitting into a plan to attain a more diversified Alberta economy?

JOHNSTON: In terms of any economic strategy, the key element is the universities and colleges . . . Simply, to provide well-trained, well-educated people and I think there are earning benefits in that, and that must be a priority for any advanced industrial state . . . The research potential of universities is fairly substantial. That would you lead to be able to harness that and to transfer it from notion to promotion so that it becomes commercial, so that we can use it for exploiting our economic benefits in our province.

GATEWAY: Given the information you have now, what do you expect enrolments to be like next year?

JOHNSTON: We expect a softening in the student numbers next year. That is, universities overall this year expanded 10.3 per cent and colleges 16.9 per cent. Next year, it'll be down to 8 or 9 per cent would be my guess. We're trying to put some kind of profile together for next year. It's not that easy.

GATEWAY: Do you think the liberal arts are losing out given the "tough economic times"?

JOHNSTON: I personally don't. I'm encouraging everyone I talk to, if they want to go to university to at least spend two years on a liberal education. Maybe more. Learn about philosophy of life, take a little math, a bit of economics, even some political science. Try to get as broad a base as possible then screen out the areas that aren't really of interest to you and then really start to focus . . . So, I don't disagree with the liberal arts. I do think, particularly, that more women should go into sciences, engineering, and the higher tech areas as opposed to avoiding them which they tend to be doing.

GATEWAY: The Faculty of Arts is looking at ways to restrict enrolment, unless they get more funds.

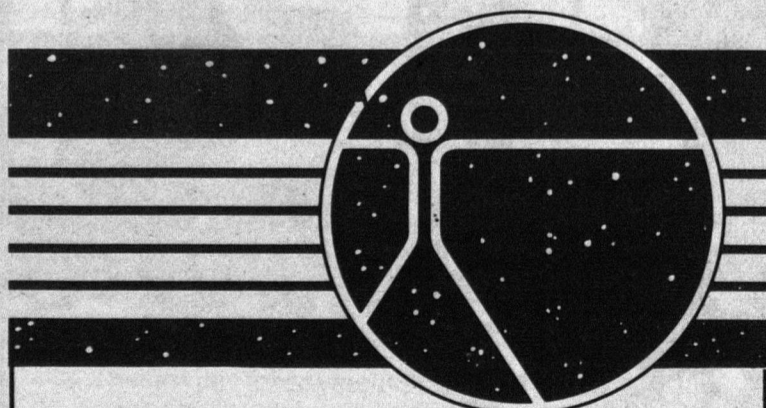
JOHNSTON: What's happening is that the faculties have filled up, from professional down, and the last faculties you can put a quota on is Arts and Science. That doesn't mean it's being exploited or under-funded or anything of that order. It just means that the university is now full.

GATEWAY: Isn't it the government's fault? Acting Dean of Arts Qureshi says his faculty will have to "restrict unless there are more funds." Qureshi essentially disagrees with the gov't perception that enrolment increases are temporary. He says the government's to blame.

JOHNSTON: Of course he is. He's not winning the battle within the institution for the allocation of resources. He's obviously not winning the battle. Others are winning the battle. It's not our fault. The bidding for the internal resources within the institution are done by Deans. I simply transfer the money to the university and say "Look, you decide yourself how to spend that." So I haven't got the autonomy, the levers to say more money goes here or more money goes there. It's up to the Board of Governors. If you're going to argue autonomy then you have to allow them to allocate resources and we do.

GATEWAY: You have certain channels as the Minister.

JOHNSTON: I have no channels. By agreement I could say, "Gee, I could do a little bit more for computing science. Can you handle it?" I'm responding to their need. I can generate new courses. It's the only thing I



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