

## Let's hope the government listens

THIS WEEK'S GAZETTE CARRIES a number of articles in response to the Royal Commission report on post-secondary education.

The articles were collected from the university community. From students, from student government, from faculty, and from faculty unions.

These articles, hopefully, are not mere exercises. While the student contributors will graduate and move on, universities will remain, and just how they remain is important.

The debate does not stop here. The issues discussed should not be allowed to die. The Commission achieved, at least, in lighting the spark of the discussion and we hope the light won't fade.

## March in Feb

To the Editor

Why should students be upset about the Report of the Royal Commission on Post-secondary Education? Why should anyone be concerned about something that sounds so boring? For one thing, it took three years and over half a million dollars to produce the thing, and something that took so long and cost so much warrants the public's attention. More importantly to us, the report will probably be the blueprint for the Education Department of the province for quite some time and if it doesn't affect you it will definitely affect your younger sister, brother, cousins, nieces and nephews.

This report has changed the entire philosophy of education in Nova Scotia, from a public investment to a public liability where students should pay much more as the primary beneficiaries of education — not the public. This translates into increases in the tuition of over 100 per cent, differential fees for students in Science, Engineering, Law, Medicine and Graduate Studies, and the removal of the Bursary Programme for more loans. The tuition increase is to represent the benefit that we derive from our education and make us more of a "partner" in funding the universities. The differential fees are to reflect the differences in educating a historian and a chemist and will price a B.Sc. far higher than a B.A. in Nova Scotia. Finally, the provincial loan programme is to be provided to help us pay for the first two, even though it seems that those of us lucky enough to receive Student Aid will owe over \$20,000 after we graduate.

If financial matters do not worry you, perhaps the threat to academic freedom is something that might cause alarm. The Commission wishes all undergraduates to complete a two-year, eight-credit core curriculum or

And we are afraid. Afraid that Nova Scotian government will implement some of the commission's recommendations when the legislature sits next month. Afraid students will have to pay more for an education that is rightfully theirs. Afraid that universities will become even more closely aligned with government dictated education priorities.

We have had enough official symposia and forums in response to the Commission report. Now it's time for restructuring, rethinking post-secondary education in its entirety. This issue's contributions are willing to continue the discussion.

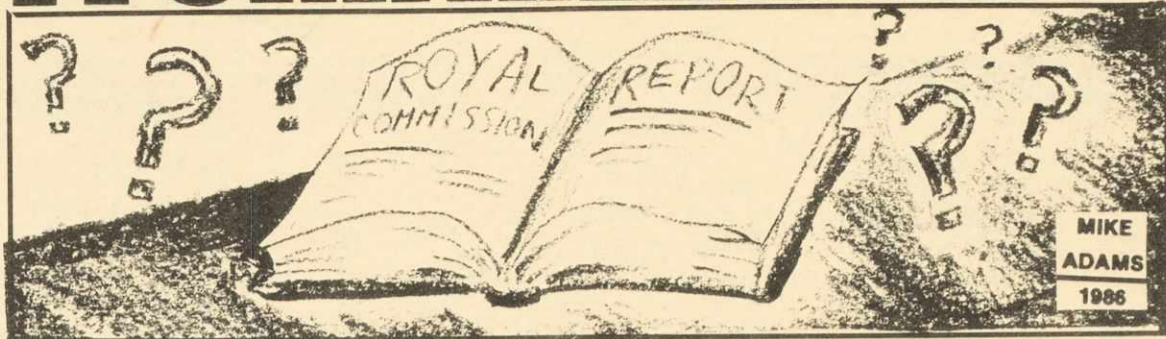
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not receive a degree. While this may not lengthen everyone's programme of study, you will certainly have less flexibility in a three-year or four-year Honours programme. Of course, the chemist and the historian will be paying differential fees for fulfilling these same requirements, but that may not be enough to concern the students of today.

Of course, these are all just recommendations and may not be implemented. The Council on Higher Education was just a recommendation too, but the Minister of Education has informed us that we will have one before the summer is through. This Council will set curriculum and give its approval/disapproval to university programmes and departments — all without public debate or political discussion. These decisions used to be made by your Board of Governors, the Province, and the MPHEC, but isn't it easier to have all academic and political decisions made by one body? The only problem is that you can make an appearance before your Board of Governors, elect your politicians, or agree or disagree with the recommendations (not decisions) of the MPHEC, but the Council is not responsible to anyone except the Cabinet that appoints it.

There will be several thousand students telling the provincial government that this is not the idea of education's future that they had. On Thursday, we will be meeting at the SUB at 11:30 a.m. and marching to Province House to deliver our version of the future, not the Royal Commission's version of an inaccessible and elitist university system for Nova Scotia. We have never needed each other as much as we do now. Your chance is February 13 — don't let each other down.

James LeBlanc  
Chair, SUNS



## Questioning the report

By OM P. KAMRA, Ph.D.  
President, NSCUFA

THE CENTRAL RECOMMENDATION contained in the Report of the Nova Scotia Royal Commission on Post-Secondary Education is the creation of a Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education. This government-appointed Council would have control over university planning, programming and resources. Such state control of post-secondary education, as proposed in the Report, is without precedent in free, Western democracies. The Royal Commission clearly wishes this government agency to steer universities away from their current policies which have served Nova Scotians well. The government Council is asked to put in place policies that would, under the mask of "liberal education", "quality" and "excellence", return us to the by-gone era when university education was the preserve of an elite. The powers that are proposed for this government-appointed body would allow it to put these policies in place without future accountability to the people of Nova Scotia.

The reasoning presented in the Report to justify such a radical change is neither thorough nor persuasive. Worse, although the Report took almost three years to produce, it shows no evidence that the Royal Commission did any research to create a firm foundation for the establishment of policy. Instead, the Royal Commission has provided us with their "perceptions" which appear to be nothing more than restatements of misconceptions and old clichés about the educational process. It now remains with organizations such as the Nova Scotia Confederation of University Faculty Associations (NSCUFA) to correct in a detailed fashion the errors, omissions, and the inconsistencies underlying the Report's recommendations. An immediate task, however, is to challenge the policy agenda expressed in the recommendations.

The Minister of Education very hastily accepted the Report's recommendation to create the Council on Higher Education. The Minister has an obligation to tell Nova Scotians whether his endorsement of the Council includes the policy agenda that the Royal Commission has outlined for this government agency.

### Accessibility to Knowledge

Education is a means by which people gain access to knowledge. This process not only benefits the individual but all of us collec-

tively; for example, better farming techniques, state of the art manufacturing processes, advanced medical knowledge, new players for our theatres, and ultimately a better sense of who we are. The fundamental question of education policy is "Who will gain access to knowledge?" Currently, anyone whom universities believe to have ability is given access to higher education. It is left to the individual to determine the kinds of knowledge they seek. The Royal Commission apparently believes that there are too many students studying in our universities. The impact of its recommendations would lead to a dramatic decrease in university enrolments. Furthermore, its proposed government-appointed Council on Higher Education would have the power to determine which kinds of knowledge were accessible and by whom, and even to determine where in the province a student would have to study.

*Does the Minister accept that it is proper for the Council to determine which Nova Scotians will go to university, how many will go, where they must go to university, and once there which kinds of knowledge they will be allowed to study?*

### The Question of Quality

An underlying theme of the Report is that there are too many students in our universities. The Royal Commission is concerned about the continuing increases in universities' enrolments and the decreases that have occurred in vocational and trades schools. Clearly, they would like to reverse these trends and to channel more students into government-controlled occupational training programs. As part of this strategy, the Royal Commission questions both the ability of the students in university and the quality of their high school preparation. The recommendations would have the effect of improving "quality" through nothing more than denying admission to students whom the universities now consider to be qualified.

The Report indicts the quality of education provided in Nova Scotia's public schools. It proposes a complete restructuring of the high school curriculum to implement a core program for university preparation. Only those students who had successfully taken the core would be allowed to go to university. The Report offers no suggestion on the cost of such substantial changes in curriculum.

*Does the Minister of Education accept the Report's suggestions that schools administered by his Department have failed in the*

*academic preparation given to students who wish to go to university?*

*If the Minister of Education accepts the Report's recommendations, is he willing to commit additional resources to the public schools to help them improve the quality of preparation for post-secondary education?*

The Report implies that even if a core curriculum were introduced into the public schools, the standards of the different school districts are not to be trusted. The Royal Commission recommends the introduction of a university entrance exam to ensure that only students of uniform "quality" are accepted. Their Report does not mention the controversy surrounding the use of such tests in the United States. Entrance exams are of questionable value in predicting whether students will succeed in university. Furthermore, these tests will likely favour the admission to university of sons and daughters from upper middle class families living in urban areas. These tests are nothing more than barriers to education. They will be used to exclude students who have the academic skills and potential to benefit from university education.

*Does the Minister of Education accept the use of entrance barriers to frustrate the aspirations of those Nova Scotians seeking a university education?*

Once students have been admitted to university (though not necessarily to a university or program of their choice) the Royal Commission expects them to take a common, regimented two-year core program. The Report argues that the costs of instruction and the pressures of the job market have forced students to specialize too early in their university education. Unless we wish our university graduates to be at a competitive disadvantage with students studying outside the Province, the core program would have to be added to the existing program requirements. The core program that is proposed in the report would add at least another year to all undergraduate degree programs. In addition to increasing the costs to students, it would also require increases in university staff and facilities. The Royal Commission makes no comment on how these additional costs are to be covered.

*Is the Minister of Education prepared to commit additional resources to the universities to pay for the implementation of the recommended core program? If not, how does the Minister expect the new core program to be funded?*