

Victorious Liberals to ignore students?

TORONTO (CUP) — Ninety-five seats in the Ontario legislature may be good news for David Peterson, but it doesn't bode well for the province's college and university students.

The September 10 Ontario election saw the New Democratic Party and the Progressive Conservatives swamped, with only 19 and 16 seats respectively. The Liberal sweep, the biggest for any party in Ontario's history, saw PC leader Larry Grossman lost his seat and resign as leader on election night.

University groups say they are worried about the future of post-secondary education in Ontario now that a Liberal minority government which took a "constructive first step" towards eliminating university underfunding has been replaced by a "less sensitive Liberal majority".

"Our first reaction is one of concern," says Bob Kanduth, communications director for the Ontario Federation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA).

"We would hope that they don't use that majority as a way

of ignoring a whole host of issues and that post-secondary education would be one of them," he said.

Kanduth said because post-secondary education issues were not a highlight of the election campaign, there is no guarantee that they will become one now that Peterson is back in power.

"On some of the stuff, he has come through," said Kanduth. "He has made some positive first steps in trying to restore the health of the system but that's about as far as it's been."

Kanduth said the govern-

ment's first throne speech "should give us a good indication of where the government is headed."

John Starkey, OCUFA president, wrote in a recent Globe and Mail article that while Peterson has repeatedly said the Liberal government will make spending on post-secondary education a priority, it has not.

Starkey wrote that an estimated \$500 million needs to be injected into the university system in the next three to five years if Ontario hopes to keep pace with its major international competitors.

Besides the \$500 million in operating funds, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) estimates that an annual increase of \$133.5 million in capital funds is also needed to maintain existing university buildings and build new ones.

But while these large injections of capital haven't been forthcoming in the last 24 months, the Liberals have been quick to highlight the "few small steps" they have taken.

In the past year, they have

increased operating grants to universities by \$86.95 million or 7.3 per cent.

The Liberal government has also committed itself to spending \$84 million over the next five years to hire additional faculty members.

In late February, the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) got a 17 per cent increase in funds, and on the campaign trail in early September, Peterson announced another \$5 million for special projects. He also announced the extension of the repayment period for loans over \$10,000 from seven to ten years after graduation.

"All in all, the Liberal record is nothing to be proud of," writes John Starkey, adding that despite the Liberals' small initiatives, universities remain underfunded.

Kanduth agreed. He said in the months after the Liberals were elected, in 1985, "we got the sense that there was a trend here. That maybe they weren't going to put as much money into post-secondary education as we thought they might."

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