

Government Orders

Members are likely aware of a recent report of the United Nations which places Canada at the very top of the list in terms of human development. The results were based on an assessment of a number of elements within various countries. It is significant to note that one of the main successes contributing to Canada's number one ranking was our enviable rate of participation in education.

Canadians recognize the value of pursuing educational opportunities, value in terms of personal growth and fulfilment and also in preparing oneself for the marketplace. In view of the ever changing nature of the marketplace, however, we cannot afford to stand pat and be satisfied. We must continue to invest in Canadians.

The bill we are debating today will strengthen and improve our investment in the education and training of Canadians both young and old.

[Translation]

This bill clearly does not infringe upon provincial and territorial areas of jurisdiction when it comes to education. It still provides for an appropriate compensation for provinces and territories that opt out of the Canada Student Financial Assistance Program and set up their own programs.

In this case, this is what Quebec and the Northwest Territories have decided to do, and the opting out clause remains an essential part of the new act.

[English]

Let me speak for a moment about the Northwest Territories. The Northwest Territories decided in 1988 that it wished to administer its own student aid system and receive compensation from the federal government. This has worked very well indeed.

Under this bill the formula for compensation would be expanded to include the new program elements such as the proposed, deferred and special opportunities grants. This will ensure that students in the territories will also benefit from the improvements to the federal student aid program. The opting out provision is a clear indication of the federal government's commitment to co-operate with provinces and territories to deliver student aid to post-secondary students in all regions of the country.

We do not intend to interfere, but we very much intend to respond to the needs that are there in all of the programs that we deliver and co-operate with provinces and territories on. That includes the youth initiatives as well.

In many respects the Canada student loans program has epitomized co-operation among governments. The federal government provides for the financing of student loans through the lending institutions. The participating provincial and territorial

governments play a role in determining students' eligibility and assessing their financial needs.

Federal student aid is complemented by provincial assistance. Provinces have encouraged the federal government to remain involved in the area of student assistance. The maximum levels which a student can borrow will be increased by 57 per cent to account for today's costs. This is a key component of the reforms that will benefit thousands of students starting in August. Although the costs have increased over the years there has been a freeze on those amounts. This is very much welcomed by the students as well as by the general public.

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In developing these reforms through consultations with provinces, students and interest groups, it became clear that loans no longer meet the needs of all groups of students. There is the need for new instruments of assistance to maintain debt loads at reasonable levels and to help groups with special needs obtain the benefits of post-secondary education.

It is vital that the government continues its role of promoting access to higher education and training and helping those who otherwise would be denied opportunities. This is where the special opportunity and deferred grants introduced in the bill come into play. We propose to reach out to those students whose particular circumstances mean that their educational costs are above and beyond what the vast majority of students encounter.

Specifically this includes students with disabilities, part time students in particularly tight financial situations, women in certain fields of study at the doctoral level, and students who will face very high debt loads because of financial institutions.

The creation of special opportunity grants for women in certain Ph.D. programs is an important initiative. It was stated in 1991 in the Smith commission report on Canadian universities that there was a troubling under-representation of women mainly in graduate programs, mathematics, physical science and engineering. While women are participating in professional schools not as many women as men are seeking Ph.D. degrees. The women remain a small minority in most engineering schools. There is a serious lack of women not only in faculty positions but in positions of administrative leadership.

Need I say more? The government is committed to bringing citizens with disabilities into the mainstream of society. We intend to build upon the important progress which has been made so far. We recognize that much needs to be done to ensure that Canadians are not denied opportunities because of their disabilities. In this regard special opportunity grants of up to \$3,000 per year for students with disabilities will help them pursue post-secondary education by addressing those special costs related to disabilities that other students do not face.