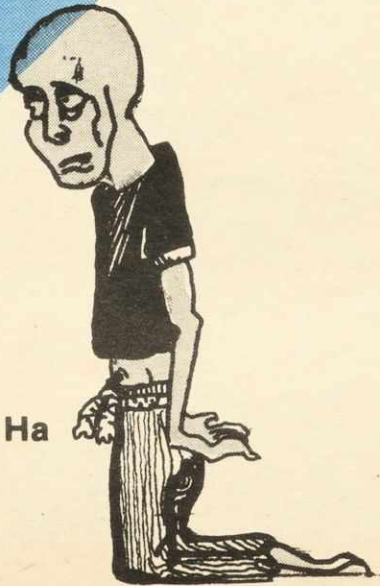


Please,
Mr. Federal Government, sir,
could I please have a
tiny bit of food
with my education?



High education, low priority

Government schooled in cutbacks

by Aaron Derfel and Tu Thanh Ha
Canadian University Press

Inside the grand ballroom of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal, Brian Mulroney is walking to the podium to thank the administrators of Concordia University.

Mulroney resigned from Concordia's board of governors in June 1983 after winning the Progressive Conservative party leadership. Held in November, the banquet has been organized to honour his departure and raise funds.

During his three-year tenure, the new Tory leader attended only three of 36 monthly board meetings so, after his speech, a reporter asks Mulroney why he is being lauded for his "outstanding contributions" when he missed so many meetings.

Flicking his finger, Mulroney smiles and says "Next question?"

When the Tories entered the House of Commons with a 211-seat majority in 1984, Mulroney promised that his cabinet would increase scientific research funding and improve relations with the provinces over post-secondary education.

Five years later, Mulroney's party is heading to the polls again — but lost in the attention given to free trade has been the Tories' mediocre education record.

It was November 1985, one year after the PC's sweep to power, and sitting in his gigantic office in Hull, then Secretary of State Benoit Bouchard was having trouble with the reporter's question about federal transfer payments.

While education is, according to the Canadian constitution, a provincial jurisdiction, the federal government indirectly funds post-secondary education support and student financial aid.

"I just saw Mr. Wilson before this meeting but I don't remember," Bouchard said. "If I remember, I didn't discuss this question, but I'm not sure."

The Secretary of State had just confirmed that, two months earlier, Finance Minister Michael Wilson did not even consult him before deciding that transfer payments for education and health care would be cut by \$6 billion between 1986 and 1991.

The cuts were announced by Wilson in September 1985 at a private meeting of finance ministers in Halifax.

When still in the Opposition in 1984, the Tories had attacked the Liberal government for introducing similar measures.

In the House of Commons, prominent Tory MPs like John Crosby and Flora MacDonald repeatedly criticized the Liberals' six and five restraint programme which retro-actively slashed \$350 million from transfer payments to education between 1983 and 1985.

Wilson justified his decision, saying that the government had to trim its \$34 billion deficit. The federal deficit has since dropped to \$29 billion.

For universities and colleges, the cuts

came as enrollment had increased for a sixth consecutive year.

Between 1978 and 1988, operating grants increased only by 2.5 per cent in real dollars while enrollment went up by 27 per cent, according to the Association of University and Colleges of Canada.

For students, going to school in the 1980s meant paying more and getting less.

It meant having classes in a 2,000-seat concert hall and a higher student-to-professor ratio. It meant using outdated lab equipment and studying out of

portable trailers and warehouses. It meant depleted library stocks and going to the computer centre at midnight because no terminals were free during the day.

It also meant facing increased tuition fees and a bewildering array of incidental fees: lab fee, library fee, photocopy fee, class material fee, library surtax, computer lab fee, academic materials fee, academic excellence fee, etc.

According to Statistics Canada, in the past year, average tuition fees in Arts and Sciences increased by 4 to 8 per cent,

surpassing the 3.8 per cent Consumer Price Index. In medicine, dentistry or engineering, the increase was even steeper, with fees as high as \$2,500.

"Students are being nicked and dimed to death and they won't realize it until it'll be too late," says Catherine Louli, an information officer for the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS).

For student organizers like Louli, a more acute problem hides behind the simplistic cutback horror stories.

Under the current funding formula, there are no guarantees after transfer payments are received by provinces that the federal contribution will actually be spent on post-secondary education.

It is unlikely however that a new Conservative government would ask provinces to be accountable for it would be against the party's desire to "respect the letter and spirit of federal-provincial arrangements for post-secondary education."

"The federal government cannot just abdicate its responsibilities on education," Louli says. "We do not advocate a centralized government but we have to have national education standards."

FOOD? You've the audacity to ask for
food? You don't DESERVE to learn!

