

Federal Transfers to Provinces

Let me talk about education. A little while ago we heard an hon. member cite some myths. One of the myths is that we are going to tell the universities that they must be turned into glorified vocational high schools and teach people trades, and that we will no longer support the pursuit of higher education as it has existed in the past. The truth, of course, is the exact opposite. The truth is that we have said to the provinces that we are prepared to continue to increase funding for post-secondary education.

● (1600)

At the same time, the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Mr. Axworthy) announced the expansion of a skilled trades program out of new funds and the expansion of funds for programs that in many instances will be utilized, I presume, through community colleges. This means that the skills needed in industry today will be provided. At the moment it is a national disgrace that industries have to bring in immigrants because Canadians are not trained in the skills that are in demand.

Just this week the Minister of Employment and Immigration announced that an additional \$208 million will be made available to support training at the higher levels. This is not a transfer of money from the universities nor a lessening of efforts to support post-secondary education. This is an area in which one distortion occurred and I want that to be clearly understood.

We have difficulties with post-secondary education in this country today. The government wants to do its share in this field. We want to see to it not only that the universities are maintained but that they continue to improve. This level of government has been paying the lion's share of the cost of operation of post-secondary institutions in the country.

Unfortunately, the block funding concept which was introduced in 1977 has not worked well. Some provinces, notably Ontario and Saskatchewan, have failed to act in a responsible manner and have used federal funds that have no strings attached in such a way as to allow them vastly to diminish their own percentage contribution to the cost of post-secondary education. That has posed a very serious financial problem for the universities.

The public wants the two levels of government to pull together, Mr. Speaker. I agree with the statement on that score made by the hon. member who spoke ahead of me. I think we are all public servants elected at the national or the provincial level and it is the expectation of the people who elected us that we will work together. But it takes two to tango, Mr. Speaker, and federal bashing has become a national preoccupation with too many provincial governments.

Mr. Waddell: That is because the target is so tempting.

Mr. Regan: I think it is important that we have a good working relationship, but I would have it work in such a way that the people can properly judge what each government is doing.

Let me outline where we stand in regard to post-secondary education since I assumed this portfolio of Secretary of State some four or five months ago, Mr. Speaker. My first task was to become familiar with the people involved in post-secondary education in this country and to find out what they think about higher education at this time. I have had meetings with the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, the Canadian Federation of Students, educators, administrators, individual students and groups of students from Halifax to Victoria. I found that these people are proud of the post-secondary education system which was built up during the 1960s and 1970s but that they are concerned about the future financial health of the institutions as a result of persistent under-funding by some provinces. There is concern for the autonomy of educational institutions and concern about financial barriers which prevent people from all segments of society from taking advantage of the opportunities presented by higher education.

Notwithstanding their concern about the future of post-secondary education, people associated with our universities and colleges have shown positive feelings towards the role of the federal government in higher education. On March 4, 1982, the AUCC stated as follows:

While recognizing the primacy of provincial responsibility in constitutional terms we emphasize the importance of a continuing major federal role in the support of universities.

On March 1, 1982 Donald Savage, the executive secretary of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, stated:

If ever there was a constitutional convention in this country, the joint responsibility of the federal government and the provinces for the financing of universities is surely it. Both sides should live up to their responsibilities.

All across the country I have been saying that the federal government is prepared to live up to its responsibilities. It is prepared to do its part. I believe that the way to accomplish this is to change the present system so that the people of Canada know the contribution that each level of government is making to post-secondary education. Let the provinces accept our offer to finance post-secondary education separately and not as part of block funding, along with health or anything else, so that people know exactly how much money is transferred by the federal government to the provinces for that purpose. Let the provinces agree to that. People could then calculate what the budgets are for all the post-secondary institutions in a particular province. They would then see how much we offer as our portion. It is much more than the provinces pay out as their share. They would then see whether we were pulling our weight. The amounts would be available for everyone to see. If some provinces resist that, it is because they have had the comfort of spending federal moneys and of making it look as if they were provincial moneys.

Some hon. members have suggested that we want to gain political credit for this. Do we want plaques to be put in universities showing that the national Government of Canada has given x number of dollars to such and such an institution? Not at all, Mr. Speaker. It is not a question of political credit; it is a question of the right of the public to know what is done with their tax money. There is only one taxpayer, and he pays