

The education dilemma

BY MARY ELLEN JONES

Jean Lapierre, federal minister of youth, stood before the placard waving Liberal youth like Donny Osmond incarnate. Dressed in blue jeans and a mod shirt, Lapierre clutched the microphone as if he were about to break into song.

"It's great to be in Halifax," he says as the floor demonstration erupts, rabid youth chanting the names of the local Liberal candidates.

Behind them is a larger audience patiently waiting for the politicians to finish their speeches and return the stage to the free rock band playing that evening.

Despite the fact that the youth rally took place in Dalhousie's Student Union Building before a crowd largely made up of students, neither Lapierre or the speakers to follow talked about the issue of education.

After years of blaming each other, neither the provincial or federal politicians really want to talk about the sorry state of funding for universities and colleges.

While enrollments have dramatically increased over the last four years, funding has dropped in the Maritimes by 15 per cent in inflation adjusted dollars.

Universities have been struggling to cope with more students for less dollars in a variety of ways.

Tuition fees—already among the highest in the country—continue to exceed inflation and threaten access to the system for students from low income backgrounds. Expansion of programmes and the acquisition of updated equipment for existing ones is next to impossible, threatening the mandate of universities to remain at the leading edge of their fields. Academic talent is harder to draw upon when salaries are no longer, challenging the basic quality of education.

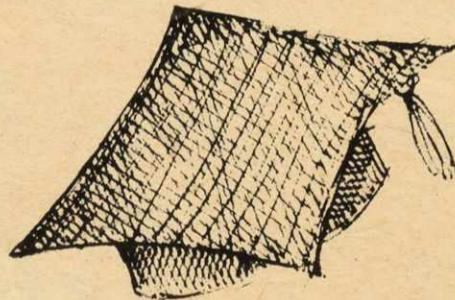
Post-secondary education funding comes from a variety of sources. The federal government pays the lion's share of funding in the Atlantic provinces, followed by the provincial government, students, and a trickle of donations from other sources.

In the midst of a massive federal spending spree this spring—designed to placate voters before an impending election—post-secondary education became a lonely island of restraint.

The federal government's Bill C-12 put post-secondary education funding on the infamous six and five programme, cutting \$118 million out of the national PSE system last year and another \$260 million this academic year.

The legislation coincided with the government's creation of a ministry of youth and its professed concern for youth unemployment. It is ignored that one of the best ways of creating jobs for youth is by first providing adequate education and training.

The Students' Union of Nova Scotia invited the three candidates in Halifax riding to debate the issue at Dalhousie. Although New Democratic candidate Tessa Hebb accepted the invitation, both Conservative candidate Stewart McInnes and Liberal incumbent Gerald Regan declined, resulting in the debate's cancellation.



Although *The Gazette* obtained interviews with McInnes and Hebb on the issue, Regan would not make interview time available to talk to us. This is despite the fact that four major educational institutions reside in his riding: Dalhousie University, St. Mary's University, The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and The Technical University of Nova Scotia.

The Conservatives' McInnes states bluntly that his party had "no specific policy about education."

"There is only so much economic pie and it is shrinking," he said. "if you give to education you take from something else. We recognize the shrinking dollars for education, but

there is pressure all around. We must get the economy moving again in order to gain confidence in world markets so that the money taken out of Canada in the last few years will be returned."

"The New Democratic Party feels that education is one of the essential public services in this country and we must maintain this public service," says Hebb. "Funds must be available to the universities for them to run smoothly."

"A lot of the problems with the funding of post-secondary education stem from the 1970's when John Turner resigned as Finance Minister," she said. "The federal government shifted the majority of the

funding load to the provinces. Here starts the vicious cycle where the federal government begins to cutback and the provinces don't give enough of their fair share to the funding of post-secondary education."

Hebb says the NDP is calling for the reinstatement of the old formula prior to the six and five limits of C-12.

Carolyn Zayid, vice-president external of the Dalhousie Student Union, says it is extremely difficult to know which party will be the best on education because "no particular party has taken a direct stand on the issue."

In addition to reducing the federal commitment to funding the PSE

system Bill C-12 also specifically earmarks funds to education. Previously education funds were transferred in a lump sum to the provinces along with funding for the health care system. Provinces didn't always parlay the allotted funds to education. In some cases dollars for scholars turned into funds for highway construction.

"The Canadian Federation of Students wants to have the funds earmarked without six and five restraint, like the medicare and hospitalization plan," says Zayid.

The NDP agrees. "There must be accountability on the part of the provincial government," says Hebb. "Accountability is the essence of good government."

McInnes said he was not that familiar with C-12, stating "there were so many issues to cover in an election campaign."

Dalhousie Student Union president Alex Gigeroff not only wants to see the funds earmarked, but would like legislation on the books to make sure the provinces comply.

"The Canadian Association of University Teachers proposal for a National Education Act is a positive solution," says Gigeroff. "It is an act which is similar to the Canadian Health Act. In the Health Act provinces which allow health care user fees are penalized."

The same sort of idea would apply to education and force the provinces to stop diverting funds into areas other than post-secondary education, he explains.

The CFS and SUNS are also both concerned about the inadequacies of existing student aid programmes. With tuition fees rising as a result of the cutbacks of C-12 and student loans becoming tougher to get, student representatives fear that accessibility to universities and colleges will be further eroded.

"SUNS would like to see the problem of student loans looked at long and hard with a bit of realism injected into it," says Judith Guthrie, SUNS executive officer. "It is difficult to determine an average figure needed for student loans across a country as large as Canada."

"Prior to the '70's the ratio of loans and bursaries given to students by the provinces was a 50-50 arrangement," says Hebb. "Now it is more like a 65 per cent loan to 35 per cent bursary. With higher loans and lower bursaries it is denying access to many working class children. It is fundamentally wrong to deny access to any Canadian."

McInnes said the provinces are doing "reasonably well" in loans.

Education is clearly an important resource in the development of any society. Caught in a kind of limbo between poor federal-provincial relations, universities are struggling to survive without any clear strategies from either the federal or provincial governments. While countries such as Sweden, Japan, West Germany, Switzerland, and Austria are investing more of their private and public moneys in post-secondary education and training, Canada's institutions have suffered from neglect. If the future of this country lies in its universities, federal politicians in this election leave us with little hope.