

Student protests useless says Globe columnist

BY BEN ERRETT

MONTREAL (CUP) — Student demonstrations are a poor medium for policy change, says Globe and Mail national affairs columnist Jeffrey Simpson.

Simpson, a recent Order of Canada recipient and national commentator, made the comments during an exclusive interview with Canadian University Press.

According to the well-known journalist, last month's protest by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) to pressure both federal and provincial governments to reinvest in post-secondary education had no impact.

"The rallies simply have no effect on policy," he said. "They have no effect on anyone who thinks logically about the problems in post-secondary education. Students simply don't have credibility when they argue for lower fees."

Michael Conlon, national chairperson for the CFS, didn't take the criticism seriously.

"Jeffery Simpson has ideological reasons for objecting to the demonstrations," said Conlon. "His agenda is not access to education. He doesn't care if middle-class or

poor students have access to post-secondary schooling."

The CFS head added that if Simpson doesn't like the battle against rising tuition, he should write to the president of Ireland for eliminating tuition fees and helping that country's economy grow.

But Simpson makes no apology in his call for higher fees.

"Provincial governments do have to increase basic funding, but to do that realistically student fees have to increase," he said. "While we ought to subsidize post-secondary education, the current subsidy is unacceptably large."

And the Globe columnist also took critics to task who say Canada has a more equitable education system than the U.S.

"If you look at the United States, the participation rate in post-secondary education is the same as it is in Canada, even though the fees at publicly funded schools there are higher," he said.

In his column following the recent federal budget, Simpson pointed out post-secondary was one of a wide range of programs that receive increased funding in this year's budget.

When asked if this meant

education was merely one priority among many for the Liberals, Simpson said he believes the government is committed to helping universities.

"I would argue that education has been like religion to the Liberals," Simpson said. "If you examine the last three budgets, the list of initiatives on education has really been impressive."

As evidence, he pointed to the millennium scholarship funds, increased money towards grants, the Canadian foundation for innovation program and now the 21st century chairs, which will be hundreds of endowed chairs for research.

Conlon, however, was unimpressed with Simpson's argument.

"It sounds like he's auditioning for a job in the future Prime Minister's Office," he said. "I don't know which Liberal government he's talking about. The Liberal government of [Finance Minister] Paul Martin and tax cuts, or the Liberal government of [Intergovernmental Affairs Minister] Stephane Dion who said our universities are in worse shape than our hospitals."

(With files from CUP National Bureau Chief)

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