

The Dalhousie administration says that it cannot meet the demands of its professors due to a lack of government funding. As a result, students are faced with a possible faculty strike/lockout. How can a provincial government have a positive impact on this situation?

NDP: The lack of government funding comes as a result of the amount of cutbacks in federal government allocations. Billions of dollars have been cut over the last few years, having a terrible impact on the funding of universities and healthcare in this province. I think it's too much to expect that our provincial government can provide all the monies that are needed for education and healthcare and social programs without additional federal funds. So it's an unfortunate situation we find ourselves in. But again, the provincial government is going to have to provide whatever monies it can. Myself and the NDP have indicated that if elected, we would reallocate funds within the spending envelope permitted. We have pledged ourselves to a balanced budget — not adding two red cents to the deficit. We'd allocate as much money as possible in consultation with the universities to ensure they can operate and maintain a standard of quality.

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Ed Kinley

LIB: I think everyone who is in those bargaining units has to remember that four years ago this government was virtually bankrupt. We had a deficit of \$617-million and it was rising every year. We were losing control of our money — we were being owned by foreign creditors. We would not have had a good post-secondary education system in this province if we had lost control of the whole financial picture. The Liberal government has been able to turn this around in four years. It has come around because of cuts the government has had to make in its programs.

The only way you can balance [a budget] and eliminate a deficit is to cut spending or bring more money into the system. Bringing more money into the system means you have to raise taxes. The economy has to grow to produce more taxes, so you [can] get more tax transfers from Ottawa. No one thought we could tax any further because [taxes] are already so high, so cuts had to be made. The cuts were chiefly in health and education because those are the two main constitutional responsibilities of the provincial government. Those are the big areas of spending. Healthcare takes 30 per cent [of the budget's funding] and the education system takes 25 per cent, so that's where the largest cuts had to be made.

They were made as carefully as possible. But they hurt. In the education system, in an attempt to deal with [the cuts], there had to be some tuition increases.

In terms of the current situation, I think the faculty has to remember that they are dealing with a finite resource. Their expectations have to be adjusted to what is financially responsible in the province. The health workers have done it, the teachers have done it, and the faculty has to do it. It may be that they are not well paid, but no one in the province is. The government is going to have to point out to the parties [involved] that they have to live within the budget — the government can't suddenly produce money.

PC: I think the current situation is due to the Liberal government's approach to these negotiations. The government has been dragging its feet here on the funding. I certainly wouldn't want to put the blame on the administration because the funding comes from the provincial government. I think the students, faculty and administration would not be faced with this if it wasn't for the attitude of the current government.

There has been much talk of a new economic prosperity for Nova Scotia. What role will Nova Scotia students play in this new economy?

NDP: Well of course, the students will become the next generation of employees. Right now the economy is not that buoyant, although Mr. MacLellan would like us to think it is. You may not be aware, but the poverty rate in this province has increased since 1993 by thousands of persons. Our concern is that we're going to lose a lot of our young people. They will seek employment elsewhere. What we're going to try to do is provide a large number of good, well paying jobs — permanent jobs — here in this province. So when students graduate, there's something there for them.

LIB: The new economic prosperity is showing signs — it is quite encouraging. The investment capital rate of increase is higher in Nova Scotia than any other province. The unemployment rate in Metro is down to 8.5 per cent, so the economy is entering a boom stage. There are more jobs in Nova Scotia now than there were four years ago. This new economy provides an opportunity for students to work, and the students are the engine for the growth in the economy — it works both ways. If you don't have an educated workforce, you won't have the economic growth, and the economic growth provides the jobs for the students. It's two sides to the same coin.

PC: Well, Nova Scotia students will soon be the professionals and the labour force of this new economy. And I think that's why education and job creation is so important. I mentioned previously what we're trying to do to make students more prepared for this new economy, but I failed to mention that we are setting up a co-op program within the provincial civil service so students can get work experience in their area of study. So when they graduate, not only will they have [been] working as a student, they'll have something on their resumé that will make them more able to get a job. Students are vital, I mean the future of Nova Scotia depends on having a work force that's educated and trained. There are jobs out there. If you look in the employment section of the newspaper — if you are unemployed you certainly don't want to hear this — there are jobs out there. The challenge is to make sure that people are trained so that Nova Scotians can take these jobs.

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Given that tuition and student debt levels are becoming prohibitive, what is the best approach to making education more accessible?

NDP: Certainly the debt load is becoming onerous. In canvassing this riding, I have encountered many students. I'm finding that many of them are carrying debt loads of \$20,000-30,000. Basically their future is being mortgaged, and I find that very worrisome.

I don't think the public at large is aware of the magnitude of these problems. When I went to Dalhousie in the 1960s, I was able to leave university without a debt and actually have my first year of education — I was an education student — paid for by the provincial government. We've come a far cry from that day.

Students now have to defer decisions like buying a house, getting married, putting money in an RRSP, because of their debt loads. There's also the difficulty of finding a job. It takes five or six years for most university graduates to find a permanent job. That's a very serious problem.

What can we do? Well, we've got to establish a cap on tuition fees — that would be our first step. This is not a long-term measure, but an essential first step. Tuition fees have been skyrocketing in recent years. In the last 10 years they have gone up 135 per cent. Tuition fees of \$5,000-6,000 are making education inaccessible to low income families. This is a concern for our party. With respect to debt, the province now has a loans remission program, and it's not a bad one. We would see adjustments and improvements to that program. We would also like to see the reintroduction of a Nova Scotia bursary program which was in place in 1993, which provided upfront grants to students in need.

Those are some of our plans. Of course we would lobby hard; we would fight the federal government to make more monies available.

LIB: The best approach to making it accessible is to keep the tuition costs as low as possible. No one that I've talked with seriously suggests that we abolish tuition and I think most of society would agree. There are too many other demands on the limited resources of government. There are other social programs in existence and additional programs which are being looked at — such as child care. But we have to control the tuition, keep it

reasonable, and make loans to students accessible. The loan revision program is part of accessibility. We have provincial loans and Canada student loans. Harmonization of the loans has to be looked at. The other part of the loan, of course, is... repayment. It has to be based on the ability of the student to repay. The interest should be deferred until you are able to pay. There is a loans remission program in Nova Scotia. The province together with the Canada student loan repayment scheme more in line with what the province has. I think we have to remember that remissions does mean that [loans] are paid [back].

"Students now have to defer decisions like buying a house, getting married, putting money in an RRSP, because of their debt loads." Peter Delefos

PC: I think there are a number of sides to this and it should not be done in one front. As I stated before, I think there has to be increased funding for education. I think the question of relieving the crippling debt load on students is a big issue and our platform addresses this as well. Students come out of Dalhousie

with an average of \$25,000 debt. They're not moving directly into paying jobs, so they can't pay back the loans. So what we'd do is set up a job search and support program for those students who are nearing the end of their industry program.

Provided that the student is participating in this program — looking for jobs and deciding on the training they may need — the interest-free period would be extended.

For those students who are lucky enough to get a job when they're finished university, we would allow them to set off a portion of their student loan payments against their provincial income tax, so they'll get to reduce up to 30 per cent what they're paying in provincial income tax. We've costed out all the implications of this platform and this would cost the government \$1.8-million, but I think it will help former students who are struggling. We've also announced bursary programs and bursaries for medical students.

Do you see the rise of corporate influence in government as positive or negative? Why?

NDP: I see it as negative. I see our governments now moving more to the right and I see more of a corporate mentality. As evidence, the government is trying to privatize everything — our social services, for example. And so now we see the phenomena of the "Three P" schools. They are built by the private sector and then leased to the province over a number of years. Our province claims this method of funding buildings is advantageous — cheaper schools built fairly quickly. They have started a number of schools under this arrangement, but they haven't concluded any leases yet. I guess the private sector now is having second thoughts. It will be interesting to see what will come of that.

But that whole mentality, the privatization of the public sector, comes from the whole corporatist mentality "better make a buck on everything." Now we have the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. Canada has been secretly involved in negotiations with 29 other developed countries to sign an agreement which is basically a Bill of Rights for the corporate sector. They can come into this country and basically move money around at will. They are treated exactly the same as a Canadian citizen.

That whole development is of some concern to me personally. I think the corporate sector is an important generator of jobs in this economy. Some large corporations provide excellent jobs here. Companies like Michelin, and home grown industries like Sobey's. But we don't want the interests of Nova Scotians to be in the place of the corporate [sector].

LIB: There's a couple of aspects to that. The corporate influence, I think you can look at in terms of the direct influence on governments. The direct influence is by lobbyists and active lobby groups working in the government. Lobby techniques are a way of educating governments and bringing [specific] interests to the government.

A little more sinister can be the influence they have in terms of economic strength. By means of moving jobs into an area or out of an area depending on the cost efficiencies of the place. I think we have to be competitive; we can't just say "don't do that", it won't work. To deal with the influences of these corporations we have to have a well educated workforce, we have to be efficient and we have to be ready to compete. But at the same time the playing field has to be level and that's the problem that I see with the influence of big corporations.

"You can't deny the fact that corporations are going to influence government, but I think the challenge is that the government can not be seen unnecessarily favouring certain corporations."

Tara Erskine

PC: You're assuming this is a fact — that there has been a rise in corporate influence in government, and I'm not sure I necessarily agree. To me it looks like an NDP question, but anyway, I think that corporations play a very important role in our economy and that's something that can't be forgotten. That's small businesses in Nova Scotia, large Canadian corporations and also the multinationals. You can't deny the fact that corporations are going to influence government, but I think the challenge is that the government can not be seen unnecessarily favouring certain corporations. As an example I point out to the Sheraton Casino. There's certainly the feeling out there that the Sheraton Casino is receiving very preferential treatment compared to other small businesses which it's competing against. Those kind of things have to be stopped. We have to get away from the perception that corporations can somehow have any backroom influence or that kind of notion.

This question ties into the concerns people have about the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. I think people are afraid that large multinational corporations will, after the signing of this agreement, be dictating policy to government and take away government's power to legislate, environment [acts] and protect culture and so on. So we have to deal with those kind of concerns. The Conservative party certainly is in support of liberalized trade, but at the same time, Nova Scotians and Canadians have to be consulted on those kind of international agreements and appropriate protection has to be worked in for the environment, for labour standards and also for Canadian culture.