

Post-secondary education in limbo

by Al Huizenga

OTTAWA (CUP)—Human Resources Minister Lloyd Axworthy announced Jan. 31 his social reform initiative will have to wait until a time of greater "fiscal stability."

It was hardly shocking to anyone who has been following the news. The feeble dollar, high interest rates and ominous grumbling from the United States have fuelled deficit hysteria to unprecedented heights. But where does Axworthy's announcement leave the future of postsecondary education in Canada?

Axworthy's discussion paper on social security, released last October, suggested \$2.6 billion in transfer payments to the provinces for education could be scrapped and used as direct loans to students. The loans could be repaid through the income

tax system, according to the student's wages upon entering the workforce. The loss of university revenues would inevitably cause tuition to rise. Students would be forced to take on a larger debt load to pay for their education.

While student groups have had difficulty agreeing on methods, their opposition to the proposal has been almost unanimous. Now it seems the proposal has been shelved, at least temporarily.

But the 1995 budget still promises to be a drastic one. Finance Minister Paul Martin is expected to appease foreign investors with serious cuts to social services. If education reform has been temporarily discarded, the cuts have not.

Chris Axworthy, the NDP's education critic, says the future is still dark for Canadian college and uni-

versity students.

"It seems the cut survived, but nothing else did," he says.

Chris Axworthy says the human resources minister was forced to stall reform because of the finance department's proposal to combine transfer payments into one lump sum. He says education, health and welfare will be combined into a single payment. The federal government will have no say about how the money is divided between the three areas.

"What we'll see is one province juggling the sum in one way, and another province juggling it in another way. Regional differences will accentuate, and national standardization will be lost."

Chris Axworthy says the new lump sum will still be considerably smaller than what it is now. Tuition will still rise, and loan programs will

have to be altered to compensate.

"This is very convenient for the federal government," he says. "It all becomes the provinces' fault."

Human resources spokesperson Debora Brown refuses to say whether or not lump sum transfer payments are a possibility.

"That's just budget speculation from the media," says Brown. "I don't know what their sources are."

But Robert Jackson, a professor of political science at Carleton University, says unconditional lump-sum funding is very possible. He says right now, many transfer payments have "strings attached," such as the Canada Assistance Plan, which supplements provincial spending on welfare and social services.

"The federal government gives money under the Canada Assistance Plan under the condition that it goes to welfare only. The provinces can't get health payments if they charge user fees."

He says by reducing conditions of payment, the feds hope to get credit for giving the provinces more autonomy. This is particularly important in light of the upcoming referendum on Quebec sovereignty.

Chris Axworthy also warns income-contingent repayment loans

have not been scrapped, only postponed. He says the human resources minister will still have jurisdiction over the Canada Student Loans program, as well as \$3.3 billion in training programs.

"Income-contingent loans have become unnecessary right now because the universities will still be paid. Still, there's obviously some interest in income-contingent loans. They're still ahead."

The Commons committee report on Canada's social programs, released Feb. 6, endorsed the loan system as well. It also stressed the complete responsibility of the provinces for post-secondary education.

"Where the provinces desire to restrain tuition increases, it will be up to them to reorder their priorities. . . . It is not the federal government's . . . to prescribe the outcome of these issues," the report says.

Jackson says the move towards less federal responsibility is part of a national ideological move to the right. He says the trend disturbs him.

"This goes against the grain of an independent Canada, of core Canadian values and national standards coast to coast. All these things are being given away."

Separatism dying

by Valerie Bernard

OTTAWA (CUP)—"Demography is destiny" and, unfortunately for Quebec separatists, it isn't on their side.

In his recently released study, "Quebec Separatism is Dead," Carleton University sociology professor T. John Samuel explores the relationship between conservative attitudes and various age and social groups among Quebec voters.

Samuel's research predicts that the separatism movement "is fast fizzling out in Quebec and will soon die" because of the declining number of youth.

"Youth is often the forefront of revolution," explains Samuel. "They are more prepared to take chances. If they lose, they have lots of time left to make it up," whereas the over-40 group tends to be more conservative in their decisions.

The 1990s, unlike other periods of political change in Quebec, have a small percentage of youth.

Only 44.6 per cent of the Quebec voters will be between the ages of 18 and 39 in this year's referendum. By 2011, this number will decrease by eight per cent, while the 40 to 64 group will increase by 90 per cent.

"Some people say, 'Oh, if the referendum is lost this time, we will try again.' They are kidding themselves," says Samuel. As the tradition-conscious older generation increases in size, he says, the less chance separatists will have for support.

His study shows that not only is the number of youth declining, but the number of French Québécois is declining as well. Samuel says the Quebec allophone population (neither French- nor English-speaking) is growing faster than the francophone. About 90 per cent of allophones will not vote for separatism.

"Lucien Bouchard and Jacques Parizeau are in the limelight of a flicker of the lamp that is running out of oil," says Samuel.

Samuel's findings are supported by recent polls which indicate that 60 per cent of Quebec's decided voters said No when asked if they wanted Quebec to separate from Canada. Samuel predicts more voters will choose to remain in Canada when the time comes to make the real decision.

Professor François Rocher, a Quebec specialist in the political science department at Carleton, gives a slightly different view of the separatism trend. He says support has grown in recent years.

"The '70s support was lower than the '80s" he says. "The late '80s and early '90s were the peak [of the sovereigntist movement]."

Magic addict

by G. Kerr, The Fulcrum

OTTAWA (CUP) — Need another addiction to take your mind off school?

Try Magic, a role-playing game that is swiftly gaining popularity among the subculture of game enthusiasts.

"I don't play that often!" says Concordia University student John Richler. "Just two hours a day — plus a little more on Sundays."

Lisa Devry of Ottawa's Silver Snail Comics says, "It doesn't take a lot of preparation, it doesn't require too much equipment, and you can play it anywhere."

Devry adds: "This makes it much more convenient than traditional Dungeons and Dragons. You have your cards, your dice and you play."

Game play involves a combination of magic spells, creatures, and power sources — the forms and details of which are written on the cards.

Two or more people can play as sorcerers duelling. The winner is determined by the skill of the player, with a little help from lucky card draws and die throws.

The last 12 months have seen Magic become the fastest-moving item on the gaming board shelf. Ottawa high schools have organized playing times during lunch hours. Ottawa's Comic Book Shoppe has set up a gaming table in the store and has a regular clientele come in and profit from it.

A growing industry has come out with magazines on strategies, figures, tournaments — and believe it or not, a world championship. Imitations of Magic, such as Jyhad, Spellfire, and the popular Star Trek game, have been put out by rival companies to cash in on the fad.

Yet while the card games may be easy to set up, understanding all the rules will take a little time.

"The first couple of times you

play the game is. . ." Devry hesitates, "choppy. But after two weeks of play you master it."

A typical duel lasts about 15 minutes, but it can be as little as five, or as long as an hour, depending on the cards and attention to detail by the players.

"One of my big attractions [to Magic] is that it doesn't cater to the rich kid, the one who's got the better cards," says student Mitch Amihod of Concordia University. "A skilled player can beat someone with a stronger deck."

A starting deck for the game, consisting of 60 cards, runs \$10.95.

Yet the power of one's cards does have a bearing, and it's here where the game has attracted some criticism. Rare, powerful cards are craved by enthusiasts, and some will pay through the nose to get them.

Further, as with Dungeons and Dragons when it first came out, people fear the game could lead susceptible people to an unhealthy addiction that absorbs all their time, energy and money.

"I have one friend on unemployment who plays," says Amihod. "He was a dope addict, so he's got that kind of personality. Now he plays Magic, and instead of buying food, sometimes he buys cards. I remember one week in particular where he spent \$70 on four cards and had to cut back on meals."

Some people are worried about the kids that have been pulled in by the game. Devry voiced a concern for kids being swindled out of their valuable rare cards by older children.

Noting that it's usually parents or relatives who buy cards for the younger children, she strongly recommended buying a price guide as well — otherwise the kids could be ripped off in trade by a fast-talking future used car salesman.

Still, the thrill enthusiasts find in Magic far outstrips these problems.

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