

Education ministers waste time at conference

TORONTO (CUP)—What were the provincial education ministers really trying to achieve by holding a conference on post-secondary education issues in Toronto from October 19 to 22?

That question lay at the heart of a fiery post-conference debate among the 400 delegates to the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC)-sponsored talkfest.

The intensity of feeling about education issues was shown by a series of protests at the conference, including:

*The Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) objected to the choice of British Columbia Institute of Technology graduate Robin Williams as the "student representative" on a panel discussing relationships between advanced education and working life. Williams was described only as a BCIT graduate on the agenda. A description of his job as B.C. premier William Bennett's executive assistant was buried on page 17 of the conference's participant list.

*CFS distributed a pamphlet in the banquet hall publicizing an alternative panel, "From the Inside Out", when no CMEC activities were scheduled. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) also distributed a counter-agenda, "What is This All About?" But conference officials removed both leaflets before delegates could obtain them.

Convention Steering Committee chair Ben Wilson said it was "inappropriate" to distribute pamphlets before the banquet.

*More than 50 student and faculty delegates walked out during a dinner speech by Roger Gaudry, former Universite de Montreal rector.

Gaudry called for "rationalizaion" of higher education, and advocated cutbacks in all areas of post-secondary education.

*Donna Morgan, chair of CFS Pacific, screamed criticisms at Bette Stephenson, Ontario minister of universities and colleges, after Stephenson's speech. Conference officials told Morgan to voice her opinions through "proper channels."

*CFS and CAUT held a press conference to criticize the failure of the three-day conference.

Many delegates thought conference sessions were aimless.

"A conference on post-secondary education must address the real issues, those of real importance," said Patrick Wesley, executive director of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations. "It is clear the conference was not designed to allow this."

CAUT president Ken McGovern agreed.

"The conference didn't deal with the problems of higher education," he said. "There were just a lot of petty, philosophical discussions."

Most faculty and student delegates thought the conference's faults were deliberate.

Many said they thought the education ministers intended the conference as a way to introduce "rationalization" policies of drastic cutbacks and tighter control of post-secondary education.

CMEC officials maintained the conference was just a beginning, a way to establish "an ongoing dialogue." But many faculty and student delegates felt the conference was a "candy-coated" sell-out of Canada's post-secondary education.

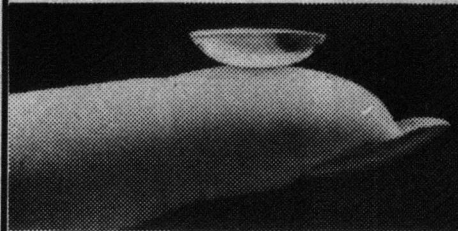
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