

The Axe-Man Cometh

Raking students over the Coles

As Tom Stoppard once wrote, "There is an art to the building up of suspense." In that case, Lloyd Axworthy is an artistic genius. Many moons have passed since we trembled at the announcement of Axworthy's forthcoming document for social program reforms. Doomsayers had it pegged as a smokescreen for slashing social spending, especially since the obviously nervous Liberals delayed its release repeatedly. Now it's out, and there is good reason to fear this "Coles Notes of social policy" as Bob Rae called it. The paper is both vague and threatening, and fiscal cuts are indeed at its heart.

Unemployment Insurance, naturally, tops the list of targets. The document is particularly daring in its suggestions here, since UI is a federal program exempt from provincial meddling. Proposals include further tightening of eligibility requirements, or a two-tiered system in which frequent or repeat users are not offered the same benefits. This is particularly ominous in the Maritimes, where seasonal staple industries like fishing and forestry make regular unemployment (and the necessity of UI) a fact of life. It's true that dependency on the program is a chronic problem here, but the government will have to come up with alternatives before it pulls the plug.

More vague and tentative are the sugges-

tions regarding subjects like welfare and education, since these and other areas fall under provincial jurisdiction. In fact, the only firm proposals in the document are those for UI. The sole certainty is spending cuts: even the Liberals admit cuts are imminent, and have

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already begun. Cuts to UI highlighted the last budget, which also called for 1.5 billion in cuts to welfare and post-secondary education by 1996-1997. Many fear that welfare could become "workfare" with mandatory training or community service for welfare recipients.

A more immediately tangible concern is education: one proposal is that Ottawa's transfers to the provinces for post-secondary education funding be replaced by student loans: essentially, the bulk of university funding would be relegated to students through astronomical tuition increases. The loans could be paid back after graduation at a rate determined by the student's income, but this still represents a frightening blow to the

accessibility of higher education. For those unwilling to mortgage their future, education will become the preserve of the rich and privileged.

All of the above points to what the government steadfastly denies: spending cuts are the core of these social proposals, if not their sole motivation. A leaked government document indicates the cabinet has agreed to cut a minimum 7.5 billion from social spending, though Ottawa denies it.

Regardless, Axworthy's plan is suspect for its nebulous presentation. Virtually nothing apart from prospective UI reform is firmly detailed for fear of alienating voters, interest groups or provincial governments. No costs of the various suggestions and proposals are included, nor are their potential effects on individuals addressed. Gutting social programs is hard enough to swallow without this kind of insubstantial sugar-coating.

If government is trying to sell us social reform without a price tag, they should remember what happened to Kim Campbell when she told Canadians social programs weren't an election issue. Bet she cracked 'em up with that one in the unemployment line.

Sean McQuaid,

Reasonable hand-drawn facsimile of an editor

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THIS WEEK'S CONTRIBUTORS:

Jason Roberts	Joel Gillespie
Cate Hanus	Jennifer Taylor
Steve Ellis	Mike Beagan
Derek DeCloet	Alex Keavne
Marko Peric	Jennifer Casele

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X-PRESS
 University of Prince Edward Island
 550 University Avenue
 Charlottetown, P.E.I.
 C1A 4P3
 Phone: (902) 566-0629
 Fax: (902) 566-0979
 E-Mail: xpress@stu1.upei.ca

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