

Martin under pressure to reinvest in education

By ALEX BUSTOS

OTTAWA (CUP) -- Federal Finance Minister Paul Martin is coming under increasing pressure from student leaders and social activists to do the responsible thing and increase transfer payments to the provinces.

Facing a \$10-billion surplus in the first six months of the current economic year, the federal Liberals are also being pressured from fiscal conservatives to reduce taxes.

"The cautious and prudent approach for Martin would be to return transfer payments to (1993 levels)," said Jennifer Story, national deputy chairwoman for the Canadian Federation of Students.

"And the reason I say it's prudent is because the gap between the rich and poor is widening... and social transfers are a social equalizer."

A recent study by the Centre for Social Justice, a research group, suggests the gap between Canada's rich in poor has increased by more than 10 times since 1973.

Last week, the Canadian Federation of Students released numbers showing part-time university enrolment has decreased 2.9 per cent since 1997.

The widening gap between the classes and falling part-time enrolment are directly linked to government cutbacks, argues Story.

"It's simple mathematics that with less social transfers the greater the pressure is on raising tuition fees, and the greater the pressure to drop out of school," she said.

Martin, however, cautioned against using the government surplus for new spending initiatives.

"I think it's important to understand that there is still a great deal of uncertainty outside of our borders," Martin told reporters Monday. "These are six-month numbers. We've got six months to go."

Rather than spend the surplus right away, said Mar-

tin, the government should use it as a defence reserve against a potential global economic downturn.

But Bruce Campbell, executive director of the non-profit Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, says the government mantra of fiscal prudence is unwarranted.

"It's like the boy who cried wolf, it may work for awhile but now no one takes his numbers seriously anymore," said Campbell.

"Everyone no matter where they are on the political spectrum -- who crunches numbers knows (Martin) will have a surplus of excess of

\$10 billion."

With such a surplus, argues Campbell, there's no reason why the government can't restore transfer payments.

A poll released Monday by the Canadian Medical Association suggests Canadians favour such a reinvestment.

According to the study, conducted by Angus Reid, 51 per cent of respondents said the 1999 federal budget should use the anticipated surplus to restore previously cut provincial transfers.

In contrast, only 20 per cent of respondents called for tax cuts.

Students oppose Concordia's plan to give Paul Martin honorary degree

By RICHARD SINCLAIR

MONTREAL (CUP) -- Concordia University will award federal Finance Minister Paul Martin an honorary doctorate this Friday at the school's graduation ceremonies.

And while the administration is excited about the national exposure Concordia will receive as a result of the award, students are mobilizing to protest it, saying Martin is the architect of massive cuts to post-secondary education.

A press release issued by Concordia's Student Union says from 1993 to the year 2200, Martin will have cut \$7 billion from transfer payments to the provinces for post-secondary education.

"I see this as a clear slap in the face to students," said Rob Green, vice-president of administration with the student union. "He's the reason we no longer have accessible health and education in Canada."

Mistie Mullarkey, vice-president external with the union, agreed. "He's cut so much funding from education," she said.

Martin and the federal Liberals have also come under attack recently for introducing changes to the federal Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act, barring students from declaring bankruptcy for 10 after they graduate.

The student union says Concordia's decision to grant

Martin the honorary degree was misguided.

It points to a university document outlining the criteria for selecting recipients of honorary degrees that says "prudence...should be shown in recommending honorary degrees to holders of public office."

The document further states the recipient must "uphold the values that lead to the advancement of learning."

The decision to give Martin an award is a blatant attempt to increase the profile of the university, Green says.

"It looks good for the university to have a person with the highest stature possible," he said.

Ugeeth Albert, secretary of Concordia's Graduate Ceremonies Committee, would not comment on the closed-door discussions that took place leading up to Martin's nomination for award recipient.

However, she said it was important to have someone who would look good for the university and that some people were not available.

"There are a lot of people we would theoretically like to give the degree to, but some are just not available," Albert said.

Martin, a former member of Concordia's Board of Governors, was willing to come.

Charles Emond, Concordia's vice-rector of services, says a desire to increase the university's stature

had nothing to do with the decision to award Martin.

"In the case of Paul Martin, there is a long history and connection (to Concordia)," Emond said. "The nomination is not out of the blue and is partly based on what he contributed as a board member."

Emond added Martin is a role model for students because of his political and business achievements, and praised him for his "courage to try to eliminate the debt."

"It's an awful thing, but we have to get used to having less money," he said.

But that attitude is self-defeating, says David Smaller, president of the Concordia Student Union.

"Universities have to take an active role in fighting for universities," he said. "Instead, the administration has decided to take the role of government lapdogs. "Scott Reid, director of communications for the finance minister, said Martin was thrilled upon learning he would be granted an honorary doctorate.

"As a former board member, he was very excited," said Reid. "There was no debating as to whether or not he would accept it."

And the allegations by Concordia's student union that Martin is responsible for cuts to post-secondary education are "unequivocally false," Reid said, adding the province are responsible for education cuts.

"Minister Martin cares

about the plight of those at university. There is undoubtedly a growing debt load on students. He has proven he cares," Reid said, pointing to \$12 billion in last year's federal budget directed at increasing accessibility to education.

Similar decisions by other universities to dole out awards to politicians have raised the ire of students across Canada recently.

In St. John's, students at Memorial University were outraged by unconfirmed reports the school was planning to award Prime Minister Jean Chretien an honorary degree.

And last month, the University of Ottawa was criticized for its decision to hand federal Minister of Industry John Manley an honorary doctorate.

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