

Vander Zalm Win A Loss For Accessibility

By James Young Canadian University Press

VANCOUVER (CUP) — THE RE-ELECTION OF THE SOCIAL GOVERNMENT in British Columbia on October 22, 1986, means that students will almost certainly continue to confront some of the country's highest tuition fees, debt loads and summer unemployment rates, as well as the country's worst student aid program.

But Marg Fartaczek, chair of the Canadian Federation of Students' 65,000 member Pacific region, emphasizes the election of 28 new Social Credit candidates is a possible basis for positive change.

"We are looking at the commitment the Social Credit party made for an open, consultative government, and we are going to hold them to it," she said.

"I don't see confrontation being a problem with the introduction of these new people," she said.

"We want to work cooperatively with them, and contribute to a recovery program of education in this province," she said.

CFS, which worked with student societies to make education an election issue, plans to begin the consultative process by presenting the new government with findings of a recently-completed task force on student aid. Student leaders will also be asking that premier Bill Vander Zalm's promise of an education commission be extended from one person.

Fartaczek is worried, though, by unconfirmed reports that funding for colleges may be cut by five per cent next year, and that the ministry of Post Secondary Education may be eliminated.

While Vander Zalm has promised an end to the B.C. government's notoriously confrontational style, it is doubtful there will be any gains for B.C. education. When recently asked about the need for better regional post-secondary facilities, the premier suggested students should continue their education in basements and warehouses.

The Socreds, who ran a campaign based largely on the styles and smiles of premier Vander Zalm, returned to power with 49 seats, while the New Democrats took 20. The Liberals and Conservatives both failed to win a single seat.

In terms of the change in the popular vote since the 1983 election, the Socreds took a comparable 50 per cent, while the NDP dropped three points to 42 per cent. The Liberals showed a significant gain from four to seven per cent.

During the campaign, NDP leader Bob Skelly called for the resignation of Post secondary Education

Minister Russ Fraser, who angered education groups when he said people "should put off their education if they cannot afford it."

Fraser later claimed he was misinterpreted, but insisted the government would not reinstate the student grants eliminated in 1984, thus making B.C. the only province to have an all-loan program.

Among the sad facts describing education in B.C. are: * the participation rate of 18 to 24 year-olds is Canada's lowest, namely 17 per cent, compared to a national average of 25 per cent; * tuition fees are among Canada's highest, with university students paying \$1,320 for a first-year arts program, an increase of 57 per cent over the last four years; * last year, provincial financial aid averaged \$66 per student, compared to a national average of \$689; * the average debt load for a graduating University of British Columbia student is \$15,000, up \$12,000 since 1984, with loan defaults close to 20 per cent; * summer unemployment rates for returning students were over 18 per cent, among Canada's worst.

One possible consolation is Vander Zalm's promise to raise B.C.'s minimum wage, currently the nation's lowest at \$3.65/hour, to about \$4.00/hour.

Although Vander Zalm started the election campaign referring to the minimum wage as "counter-productive", and spoke of eliminating it altogether for certain jobs, he later promised an increased after the NDP vowed a raise to \$4.65/hour.

The campaign was marked by the Social Credit reluctance to debate issues at all-party candidate forums, as advised in a memo from party headquarters.

During the summer's Socred leadership convention, Vander Zalm himself said, "the smart candidate avoids detailed policy statements, for they rarely help...your answers should concentrate on style."

And party president Hope Weather- spoon was even more blunt once the provincial election was called. "When we are the party in power, we don't have to get involved in public debate," she said. "We are reluctant to participate because it gives the other parties a platform."

In the campaign's final days, the polls showed the NDP cutting the Socred's initial lead from 20 to 5 per cent of the popular vote, but this surge didn't translate into seats. Many observers argue the twelve new ridings outside the Lower Mainland — eleven in areas of traditional Socred strength — gave the party an advantage from the start.


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