


The Gem



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ARCHIVES
U.P.E.I.

Volume 7, Number 22

The Student Voice of University of Prince Edward Island

Thursday, March 1, 1990

Wilson Axe Falls On Education

OTTAWA (CUP) — Michael Wilson has let his budget axe fall on university funding.

In his Feb. 20 budget, the federal finance minister announced that \$2.5 billion will be slashed from federal transfer payments, which the provinces use to help pay for post-secondary education and health care.

While Canadian business leaders lauded Wilson's "no new taxes" budget, students across the country couldn't help but worry about its consequences.

The cutbacks — \$869 million this year and \$1.5 billion next year — could mean higher tuition, lower quality education and an underfunding crisis in Canadian universities, according to student leaders and university administrators.

Whichever way you look at it, the effects of the heavy-handed cutbacks will sooner or later trickle down to students, according to Jane Arnold, chair of the Canadian Federation of Students.

She estimates that over the next five years, provinces will have \$3 billion less in federal money to pump into the country's universities and colleges.

"Provincial governments now have to decide where they're going to get the money to make up for these cuts," Arnold said. "I'm 100 per cent positive tuition will go up."

"There's no way the provinces are going to raise taxes to make up for the cuts. And as fees skyrocket,

we'll see a decrease in accessibility."

Arnold said students have plenty to complain about when it comes to the Mulroney government.

It was announced recently that federal summer job-creation programs for 1990 will be cut by \$41 million, which according to the CFS will mean 24,000 fewer jobs for students this year.

Also, late last year the government announced a new three per cent tax on student loans. And the new the goods and services tax will increase the cost of books, supplies, food, clothes, and transportation by seven per cent.

Arnold said Wilson's budget sets a dangerous precedent — and she's worried the slashing will continue as the Tory government becomes increasingly obsessed by the federal deficit.

"Post-secondary education is headed down a dangerous path," Arnold said. "We as students realize what the deficit is — we're the ones who are going to inherit it."

"But as we head into the 21st century, we should also be thinking of the future of the country. In the long run, higher education will be what makes us more competitive."

"What's happening to education is a result of short-term thinking."

According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the federal government's contribution to funding as a percentage of gross national product

has decreased by 20 per cent over the past 12 years. During the same period, enrolment increased 35 per cent.

The 1990 budget cutbacks continue that trend.

"Post-secondary education and health care are carrying the burden of two-thirds of the reductions announced by the government in the budget," said AUCC president Claude Lajeunesse.

"That's exaggerated and unfair."

Lajeunesse said Canadians are getting a "confusing message" from a hypocritical federal government that has proclaimed post-secondary education a priority.

"In spite of the promises and the importance assigned to post-secondary education, it has been singled out for most of the cuts."

He wondered about the timing of the cuts, just months after Prime Minister Brian Mulroney announced the creation of a national task force on what it calls "human resource development."

The task force — proposed by Mulroney at last November's first ministers conference — will look into problems in education.

Mulroney has been on the education bandwagon for over a year now. In speech after speech, he talks of the importance of education. "The competitiveness of nations in the global market will be determined by the quality of their ed-

ucation systems," Mulroney said in August 1989.

But Lajeunesse questions the government's commitment to education.

"How can they create this task force and at the same time cut back on transfer payments?" Lajeunesse asked.

That point was echoed by Chris Axworthy, the New Democratic Party's post-secondary education critic.

"Mulroney can't have it both ways — first he says education is a priority and then he makes these significant cuts."

"What we're seeing is Mr. Mulroney reneging on his commitment to first-class education for Canadian students," Axworthy said.

Instead of slashing transfer payments — which will cause major problems for poorer provinces — the government should be "equalizing accessibility across the country," according to Axworthy.

"Wilson's budget is an attack on the poor provinces, students — and the future of Canada."

Axworthy predicts tough times for students in the future.

"What I think we'll see is university presidents saying 'we don't want to see a decrease in quality,' and there will be further pressure on student fees."

Axworthy said Wilson's budget proves the government is not committed to the future of Canada. He pointed to other cutbacks, including a \$39 million reduction in spending on science and development programs over the next two years.

"Research and development is one of the vehicles we can use to make ourselves more competitive in the world market, something this government is always talking about," he said. "The cuts are more than short-sighted, they're stupid."

"Nobody in their right mind will refuse to invest in the future — and that's exactly what the government is doing." ■

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