

Does fed official really want to make our lives better?

BY SARA-LYNNE LEVINE
OTTAWA (CUP)

ETHEL BLONDIN-ANDREW IS LATE FOR breakfast.

The federal secretary of state for training and youth -- who has ultimate responsibility for university and college students -- has an 8:30 a.m. breakfast meeting, but it's ten minutes to nine and she still hasn't arrived.

Blondin-Andrew shows up at the restaurant 20 minutes later, with her special assistant. Dressed in a long, black fur coat and a vivid red blazer, she makes a head-turning entrance.

A busy, determined woman, she was re-elected to Parliament last year to represent the Western Arctic riding in the Northwest Territories and got the secretary of state position despite being only a sophomore parliamentarian.

Among her responsibilities are the issues and problems facing post-secondary students. That's a lot of ground to cover.

"The future isn't what it used to be... There are a number of problems facing young people today," says Blondin-Andrew. "They live in a situation where it is very competitive. Everything is global economics and all the problems are interrelated." She says times are different than when she was younger.

"In my generation, all you had to do was get an education and you were guaranteed a job. Today, it is quite conceivable that most of the young people we deal with will have to create their own jobs."

She says young people have to be more innovative and imaginative in the way they deal with the problem of unemployment. Post-secondary students have a lot to deal with these days. The prospects of getting an education and then getting a job seem slim with increasing tuition and decreasing job opportunities. Tuition has increased by over 100 per cent in the last three years at Carleton, while student summer unemployment last year also surpassed the 20 per cent mark.

The problem of increasing tuition is one of students' major concerns, but Blondin-Andrew is not too sympathetic. "It's unfortunate that the tuition costs have tripled or quadrupled but, uh, sorry, that's relative and equal to everything else."

She says cost might be an impediment to attending university, but she thinks "students have the drive and the desire" to continue finding ways to pay for school. She says even though many universities have increased academic entrance requirements, there are still people who want to get in.

The face of post-secondary education has changed a lot over the last few years due to underfunding. Transfer payments to provincial and territorial governments have been frozen

by the federal government since 1989, which the Canadian Federation of Students says has resulted in \$6.8 billion in lost revenue for colleges and universities.

Provincial governments use tax money given to them in transfer payments to fund various provincial responsibilities, including post-secondary education.

Ontario Premier Bob Rae has blamed the underfunding of universities on transfer payment freezes. Blondin-Andrew thinks Rae is "out to lunch."

"I believe that if he wants to hang tuition fees on the shoulders of the transfer payments and the federal government, he has to look at the decimation of the whole Ontario economy in relation to his ability to turn things around," says Blondin-Andrew angrily.

Still, what does the federal government propose to do about transfer payments? At the time of the interview, before the release of the federal budget, Blondin-Andrew refused to answer the question. But in their federal budget on Feb. 22, the Liberals announced that transfer payments will be frozen through 1996-97.

When asked about earmarking transfer payments to ensure the federal money does go to the universities, Blondin-Andrew is evasive.

"I can't necessarily say that's the way to do it," she says. "I know that we are trying to make life easier for students." Blondin-Andrew often repeats a vague goal of "making life easier for students," but doesn't offer many specifics as to how this could be accomplished. She won't directly answer a lot of questions. She describes topics like income-contingent loans or the re-implementation of the six-month interest-free period on student loans as "budgetary-related questions" that she can't talk about. This leaves a lot of unanswered questions.

Still, Blondin-Andrew does say she doesn't like the idea of privatizing student loans through chartered banks.

"I don't agree with it and I don't know that it is going to happen, but if it were ever proposed I would not support the idea of privatizing student loans."

Is the government going to continue to maintain the funding of the Canada Student Loans program? Blondin-Andrew says only

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that the issue is under review and that she is unsure when she will have an answer.

She says the review is "looking at the whole system of student assistance" with the goal of improving accessibility to education.

Does the federal government have one agenda for education and the provincial and territorial governments have another? Again she offers an evasive answer.

"Universities and provinces will do whatever they want with

tuition fees, but what we have to do is make it liveable and possible for students to survive," she says. "We'd like to keep tuition fees down, but the way to do that is if there is a turn-round in the economy."

Blondin-Andrew says universities should look to donations and resources from various benevolent societies and charitable foundations, even though "they are a lot harder to access than they used to be."

Another program Blondin-Andrew is responsible for is the Youth Service Corps. The new program is targeted at 18- to 24-year-olds who are out of work and school to give them an opportunity for work experience.

The program will spend \$25 million this year for 2,500 participants at 21 test sites across Canada. Of course, the names of these sites couldn't be released. Maybe it was because of budgetary reasons. Look for the site names to be released March 23.

The government hopes to have 10,000 participants and spend \$100 million in the third year.

Blondin-Andrew says her ministry "did the whole gamut and met with all national organizations that deal with youth." The meetings, in December and January, were held in cities across the country. The program is supposed to be up and running by the end of March.

Blondin-Andrew says the money to finance this program is coming from within the Ministry of Human Resources Development using money from programs that are not being renewed.

If Blondin-Andrew really wants to make life easier for the students, she's got a lot of work ahead of her.

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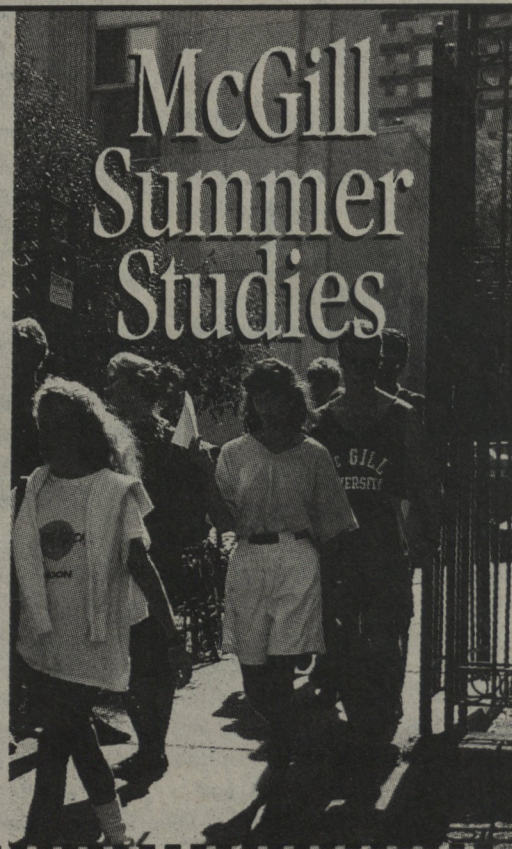
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