

Leaders address Quebec education as election campaign heats up

By **PIERRE SAUVE**

MONTREAL (CUP) -- With only three weeks left until provincial election day, Liberal leader Jean Charest and Premier Lucien Bouchard have begun fighting it out for the often ignored but always important student vote.

After weeks of virtual silence on post-secondary issues, Charest announced he would shield universities from the government's planned \$125-million education cutbacks for the 1998-1999 fiscal year.

"It is unacceptable to constantly submit colleges and universities to these cutbacks," Charest said. "The government thinks it is profiting from the cuts, but in fact, it is the development of Quebec society that suffers."

But Charest also said earlier in the race that if elected premier, he would lift Quebec's much-loved tuition freeze.

Bouchard has vowed to maintain the current tuition

freeze if re-elected.

He also says he'd like to progressively reduce parental contribution to student loans and increase the government's contribution.

Quebec students receiving loans are automatically assumed to be receiving money from their parents. The PQ, which reduced the minimum parental contribution during its current mandate, would reduce it by a further 10 per cent if re-elected.

Student loans have become a hot issue in the campaign. The PQ government recently changed the interest-free grace period following graduation for repaying the loans, reducing it from six months to one.

Quebec's Ministry of Education is currently faced with a class action lawsuit because of the changes.

Charest has said that, if elected, his government will restore the six-month grace period.

But while the Liberals

and PQ are finally talking about post-secondary education, only the third-party Action Democratique, with six per cent of popular support, is calling for a cash injection into Quebec's under-funded universities.

Party leader Mario Dumont says he'd like to see changes to the way university programs are financed. He wants to increase the funding of university programs that have a superior employment average by 130 per cent, and by 70 per cent for programs that are below the employment average.

His platform also calls for additional fiscal incentives for private companies to help finance Quebec universities and colleges.

The largest student group in Quebec says it is skeptical Bouchard can alleviate the financial dire straits of students in the province a situation it says his government contributed to.

But Nikolas Ducharmes,

president of the Fédération Étudiante Universitaire du Québec, also says his group welcomes the PQs election promises.

"All those measures are interesting and positive because they help students," he said.

Ducharmes also supports Charest's pledge to cancel the planned cutbacks, but deplores his plan to lift the tuition freeze.

Other student leaders are less eager to believe the elec-

tion promises of either the Liberals or the PQ.

"Both Charest and Bouchard are the same," said Mistie Mullarkey, president of the Quebec component of the Canadian Federation of Students. "They won't give us nearly what we want."

Mullarkey says all three parties have largely ignored the issues the group's call for a national system of grants and zero tuition.

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