

Petty politics keeps aid from students

Why won't anyone in the federal government listen to Fundy-Royal Conservative MP John Herron, or to Fredericton Liberal MP Andy Scott and Acadie-Bathurst New Democrat Yvon Godin, who support him?

Mr. Herron recently introduced a private member's motion to have the federal government consider removing the parental contribution portion from the Canada Student Loan Plan eligibility formula.

To hear it talk, there is no greater champion of the cause of post-secondary education than the federal government, which has often loudly acknowledged the critical need for it in today's economy.

Yet last week, the parliamentary secretary to Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart (yes, the one who recently mislaid a billion or so dollars in Employment Insurance funds) prevented Mr. Herron's motion – which was merely to consider, not to decide, the issue – from coming to a vote.

The grounds given by MP Diane St.-Jacques for this inexcusable stifling of debate were that the elimination of the parental contribution would cause some students' debt loads to increase even more, and that it would compromise the CSLP's original goal of helping students from low income families.

No doubt, post-secondary education students from affluent families throughout Canada are still showering praise on Ms. St.-Jacques for preventing Mr. Herron from potentially exposing them to financial abandonment by their parents in the absence of legislation forcing them to contribute to their children's future, thereby forcing even more of the latter further into the usurious hands of the cold-hearted taxpayers of Canada.

What is most surprising about this nipping-in-the-bud of what is now the valiant Mr. Herron's third attempt to help out the students of this fair land is its source.

One would think that, of all areas of government, Human Resources would welcome the debate of any option which may lead to greater accessibility

of post-secondary education to the workforce – and especially so, in view of the just-published 2001 Census statistics.

According to the Census, not only have average incomes in New Brunswick failed to keep pace with inflation, but since 1991 they have actually fallen by more than two per cent.

Ms. St.-Jacques seems to have overlooked – or deliberately ignored – the fact the CSLP parental income guidelines have not been revised for the better part of a decade. As a result, inflation has meant that more students than ever before are in "low-income" families, even though their parents' nominal income is too high for them to qualify for a loan.

Let's not be fooled by the Census data which indicates that, between 1991 and 2001, the number of New Brunswickers in the workforce who have completed some form of post-secondary education increased by almost 10 per cent.

That's because half a generation of elderly folks, some of whom didn't even complete high school, retired from the workforce during that time, and not because a large group of well-educated people joined it.

The sobering parallel statistic – the one which really counts - is that New Brunswick still has one of the lowest percentages in the country of young people between the ages of 20 and 24 enrolled in some form of post-secondary education – some 20 per cent fewer than the national average, in fact.

It is no wonder, therefore, that New Brunswick federal politicians of other political affiliations are supportive of Mr. Herron's bid to get financial help for students.

Unfortunately, though, they are up against a power-engorged group of individuals in Ottawa who, as likely as not, are stonewalling on a potential solution to a serious problem because they didn't think of it first.

(Desmond Morley is the Executive Director of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.) Published April 1, 2003.