

Federation of New Brunswick Faculty
Associations

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Social Welfare, Universities Also Need Funding Guarantees

by

Desmond Morley

Next week, the provincial premiers will be pushing the Prime Minister to restore federal transfers of health care funding to their 1996 levels by the year 2010, and to replace the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) with a dedicated Canada Health Transfer. More power to Premier Lord and his fellow premiers. To ask that federal funding for anything, let alone health care, be restored merely to the levels of 14 years earlier is not, by any means, fiscally irresponsible.

Nevertheless, while all of us would welcome the enshrinement of federal funding for health care in legislation devoted solely to that envelope – under the existing CHST, health care funding is lumped in with post-secondary education and social assistance funding – the sorry recent history of federal social program transfers should give us cause for concern.

In 1977, the Established Programs Financing (EPF) Act was introduced to regulate the transfer of federal funding for both health care and post-secondary education to the provinces. Social assistance transfers continued, for the time being, to be made under the Canada Assistance Plan enacted in 1966.

Two-thirds of EPF transfers were, notionally, to be spent on health care, with the remaining one-third going to post-secondary education. Although this intended division was not compulsory under the EPF legislation, it appears that successive Conservative and Liberal governments in New Brunswick were, indeed, relatively faithful to this unwritten “two-thirds/one-third” allocation principle.

Unfortunately, EPF funding was compromised by frequent cutbacks and freezes between 1983 and 1996, when the much-vaunted CHST was introduced to replace it. Rather, though, than alleviate the social spending problems of revenue-starved provincial governments, the CHST - which shuffles around the billions of dollars it costs to keep Canadians variously healthy, well-educated, and fed and housed, in a “now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t” federal shell game - has made them worse.

CHST funding is now lower in “real” or “constant” dollars than it was in 1996, even though since then it also has included social assistance funding. Yet, at a time when the demand for health care services is growing exponentially as the population ages, and as expensive new technologies drive up the cost of delivering them, provincial governments are expected to find in the CHST adequate funding for post-secondary education as well.

Consequently, the 3.4 per cent annual increase in operating funding granted to the universities in the recent New Brunswick budget may be as much as the Lord government can afford, but it is nowhere near enough; and further cutbacks, and increases in tuition fees, are likely to continue. Our provincial government knows this; but, having to meet an exploding health care bill from the same underfunded source, it probably can do little more to improve the situation.

Therefore, Premier Lord and his provincial counterparts should be lobbying the Prime Minister not only to introduce a Canada Health Transfer, but also to enact corresponding federal legislation, such as the Canada Post-Secondary Education Act first proposed by the Canadian Association of University Teachers more than 20 years ago, which would guarantee adequate levels of funding for post-secondary education after the CHST is gone.

If they do not do so, the funding of both social assistance programs and our universities will continue to lurch along its traditionally uncertain path for the foreseeable future.

Desmond Morley is the Executive Director of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.

Published January 30, 2003

Budget Wasn't Friendly To Universities

by

Desmond Morley

On Valentine's Day, many organizations involved in the consultation process which preceded the National Summit on Innovation and Learning found the 495-page summary of its deliberations in their mail boxes.

The university community, especially, was pleased that this comprehensive report indicated the federal government – in true Valentine's spirit – appeared to be on the point of making a serious attempt at rekindling the close relationship it had enjoyed with post-secondary education until the early 1990's.

The recommendations of the Summit, held in November, 2002 and sponsored federally by Hon. Jane Stewart, Minister of Human Resources Development, and Hon. Allan Rock, Minister of Industry, were unequivocal in advocating increased federal support in all areas related to post-secondary education.

Among these recommendations were the expansion of capacity in the post-secondary system by increasing physical, human and financial infrastructure; the introduction of a Canada Post-Secondary Education Act similar to the Canada Health Act; and the adjustment of the system of student financial assistance “to meet the needs of students, the post-secondary education sector, and the needs of the economy”.

A survey was also published locally last week showing the dilemma faced by a large percentage of University of New Brunswick students – though UNB students are not alone in this - in balancing study time with working extra hours to pay rising tuition fees.

In response to the UNB survey, New Brunswick Education Minister Dr. Dennis Furlong observed that the underlying cause of the universities' ongoing need to increase tuition fees has been cutbacks in federal funding transfers to the province.

Consequently, the release of the Summit report could not, it seemed, have been more timely.

Unfortunately, however, the recent federal Budget has failed dismally to embrace the Summit's wisdom. True, the Budget has created a Canada Graduate Scholarship Program, and has allocated increased funding to research; but by not dealing with the issue of their basic operating funding, it has completely ignored the universities' most fundamental need.

It is particularly unhelpful to New Brunswick that the Budget also ignores Census data - some of it, again, released last week - which tell us that, while almost half of the 1.3 million new jobs created nationally between 1991 and 2001 required university qualifications, and only 25% required high school graduation, this province's workforce continues to have an inordinately high percentage of high-school graduates, and a below-average number of post-secondary graduates.

Without doubt, the global "good-help-is-hard-to-find" phenomenon, which is expected to begin with the first massive baby-boomer retirements less than a decade from now, will siphon away even more of our skilled workers than the 1,700 or so who are already leaving every year. If so, and if we fail to educate far more of our workforce at the post-secondary level than we are now doing, New Brunswick will have a hard time meeting its growing internal requirements for them.

This big-spending Budget (in which, nevertheless, the overall allocations for post-secondary education are only one-fifth of what would be needed to restore federal funding for it even to levels of a decade ago) has been widely acknowledged to be a "something-for-everyone" budget.

Regrettably, such budgets usually have a "not-enough-for-anyone" outcome as well - and this one is no exception.

Desmond Morley is the Executive Director of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.

Published February 24, 2003

Petty Politics Keeps Aid From Students

by

Desmond Morley

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.

Human Resources: Are We Investing Enough?

by

Desmond Morley

As we head towards a provincial election, we should take the time to evaluate the spending record of the government of premier Bernard Lord in the area of social programs.

To many of us, that simply means we must make sure this government has been paying enough attention to health care. After all, as the population ages, more of us are becoming preoccupied with whether or not we will be able to get adequate health care services in the – increasingly likely – event we will need them.

That mindset is fine in the short term, but we also have to become equally preoccupied – and soon – with the amount of attention being paid by government to ensuring there is an adequate supply of the human resources who will be delivering health care services to us in the future.

Doctors, nurses, radiographers, physiotherapists, kinesiologists, psychologists and the myriad other “-ists” and health care professionals upon whom we so gratefully rely, are obliged to start their careers by obtaining at least one university degree. Yet not one penny of government funding comes directly from the health care envelope to subsidize the expense of educating them – even though, generally speaking, their courses are among the most expensive offered by our universities.

Consequently, we also must keep a watchful eye on the provincial education budget – that’s where all the funding for these professionals’ education comes from.

Not only the health care field, of course, relies on our universities to produce well-educated individuals. The exploding demand for them in the economy as a whole also has been well documented over the last few years, both in these pages and in other authoritative media.

Therefore, a careful examination of some recent – and perhaps disquieting – statistics may be in order before we go to the polls. Some of them may have a cause-and-effect relationship – it’s hard to say – and some are unrelated to the others. Nevertheless, taken together, they make thought-provoking reading:

- Provincial government funding per full-time student for New Brunswick’s universities has fallen, overall, by more than 10% in the last decade – even after taking into account the 3.4% increase granted last year.

- New Brunswick now spends 16.7% less of its Gross Domestic Product on post-secondary education than it did ten years ago.
- Average university tuition fees in New Brunswick have more than doubled in only the last decade.
- In New Brunswick last year university tuition fees alone were, on average, 10% higher than students' earnings from summer employment.
- University enrolments in New Brunswick recently fell while they increased, overall, by 6.6% in the rest of Canada.
- Since 1991-92, the number of students attending New Brunswick's universities part-time has fallen by almost 30%.
- The percentage of the New Brunswick population holding university degrees is 26% lower than it is in Nova Scotia.
- Nova Scotia allocates one-third more of its total provincial expenditures to post-secondary education than New Brunswick does.

Last year, the current Conservative government gave an increase in university funding of 10 percent over three years. This was considerably more than the 6.12% three-year subsidy most recently given by its Liberal predecessor. Nevertheless, this government's relative generosity still falls short of what the universities really need to produce the health care and other professionals New Brunswick is going to need to stay in the game.

In fact, whoever we elect in the next election must commit New Brunswick to spending at least as much on post-secondary education, relatively, as Nova Scotia does. Otherwise, we won't even be able to stay in the game being played in our own back yard.

Desmond Morley is the Executive Director of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.

Published May 3, 2003

Universities Must Keep A Solid Grip On Autonomy

by

Ian Fraser

Last week Premier Lord announced that, if re-elected, his government would increase university funding by 3.25 per cent each year for the next four years.

That's strange, because last year he committed his government to giving a 10 per cent increase over three years, and we still have two years left to go at 3.3 per cent per year on that one. As a result, we're actually going to lose on that deal in the first two years of the new four-year commitment.

Later, Mr. Lord also made it clear that the universities will now have to come before a committee of the legislature to account for their use of taxpayers' dollars.

This would be fair enough, if the elimination of wasteful practices were the only goal. Unfortunately, though, too many members of the legislature feel that the universities should be nothing more than sophisticated trade schools teaching high-end "marketable" skills. As a result, any such insistence on "accountability" before the legislature is to open the door to the "we pay for them, so we should say what they do" group.

If this were to happen, in the name of meeting current economic imperatives successive governments would feel free to undo, or tinker at will with, the curriculum changes imposed by their predecessors. The result would be chaos.

Our universities, therefore, must maintain their autonomy and I will be voting for the party I feel is most likely to guarantee that they do.

Ian Fraser is Chair of the Psychology Department at St. Thomas University and Chair of the Communications Committee of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.

Published May 29, 2003

Stem The Tide of Rising Tuition Fees

by

Desmond Morley

For Camille Thériault it was toll booths.

For Bernard Lord, if he isn't careful, it could be automobile insurance – “it” being, of course, losing one's place at the helm of the province over one issue, while otherwise riding comfortably high in the polls.

Why?

In March of this year, the Lord government passed legislation amending the Insurance Act. Now, if we are injured in a car accident caused by someone else's negligence, we cannot recover damages from them for “minor personal injuries” or “soft tissue injuries”.

The definitions of these two terms will be found in the revised Regulations to the Act; these, however, will not be announced until after the election results are in.

Also, even though we may not be at all responsible for the accident, if we are badly enough injured that we have to take time from work we now have to use up any accumulated sick leave we may have.

We can't claim it back from the other driver either, so the next time we get sick for any reason and lose time from work, it will have to be at our own expense.

Insurance rates have not come crashing down, though, despite these measures. Therefore, it isn't too great a stretch of the imagination to conjecture that voters who don't know if, for example, irreversible nerve damage causing chronic lifelong pain is a “soft tissue injury”, or who may be obliged to lose time from work at their own expense as a result of injuries caused by some other drivers' recklessness, will clamour for more pre-election action on this issue.

How ironic.

Like insurance premiums, university tuition fees in New Brunswick have been rising so rapidly over the last few years that they have more than doubled in the last decade.

This year, students at Mount Allison University will be paying \$380 more in tuition fees than they did last year; Université de Moncton students \$306 more; University of New Brunswick students \$245 more; and St. Thomas University students \$175 more.

So, while the percentage comparisons are different, students and their parents will have to come up with similar sums of extra money to pay both the recent increases in their car insurance premiums and this year's tuition fee increases.

The difference is, they have had to do the latter every year for the last ten years or more.

Most families in this province own at least one car. Believe it or not, a majority of them also has at least one member who has attended, or is attending, a university.

According to a recently-released report prepared by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, in New Brunswick the unemployment rate of university graduates in June 2001 was less than half that of the general public. Their average earnings from employment had risen by more than 30 per cent to \$36,192 in only four years.

In other words, the importance of the universities in our economy cannot be overlooked.

Despite this, though, there has been no public outcry about the constant tuition fee increases we have had to endure since the early 1990's.

In a laudable attempt to stem the tide of rising tuition fees, Premier Bernard Lord is reported to have promised increased government funding for our universities of 3.25 per cent over the next four years. Yet, if his government were instead to give only 1.75 per cent more, tuition fee increases would be completely unnecessary.

When we are clamouring for government-inspired rollbacks and freezes, then, we should be looking much further than automobile insurance rates.

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Published June 3, 2003

Universities Merit More

by

Desmond Morley

Despite the drop in media coverage of the automobile insurance furor in the last few days of the recent provincial election campaign, the election results show that it is not an issue that is going to go away.

It is sure to continue to be the subject of heated debate in the legislature, because the voters of New Brunswick have made it clear that they do not want to be obliged by law to buy automobile insurance which gives them little or no coverage in return for the faint hope that premiums may fall.

We hope, however, that other topics of everyday interest, and of equal or even greater significance, will find room in the political debate as well.

Among them is government funding for post-secondary education.

Premier Lord has promised a 3.25 per cent increase in each of the next four years. The trouble is that these increases, well-intentioned though they may be, will not even keep pace with inflation. Despite last year's increase of 3.4 per cent, two of our four universities have been obliged to raise their tuition fees by 8 per cent, and the other two by 5 per cent, for the coming academic year.

Almost every household in New Brunswick owns at least one car, and the rising cost of automobile insurance is important. It is not widely acknowledged, however, that at least one member of the majority of this province's households attends, or has attended, a university. For them, therefore, an average increase in tuition fees of the order of \$300.00 is just as important.

A study conducted recently by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission shows that, in 2001, the unemployment rate of our university graduates was less than half the provincial average, and that the salary of the average university graduate with only two years' workplace experience had risen by 30 per cent from what it would have been only four years earlier.

The spin-doctors would have us believe that the average student debt load on graduation is \$18,000.00 or so. That's true if every student, including those who have not had to borrow at all, is included in the calculation. The average figure for those students who actually have incurred debt to attend university is closer to \$30,000.00 - and it is climbing every year.

There is no denying that increases in government funding for our universities of more than 3 per cent per year over five years are, by recent standards, generous. Even so, it must not be overlooked that this province is now spending almost 17 per cent less of its Gross Domestic Product on post-secondary education than it did only ten years ago.

Ironically, though, the contribution of university graduates to the increase in the provincial Gross Domestic Product – as the MPHEC report cited above demonstrates – grew by at least 30 per cent in the area of salaries alone, over a period of only four of the same 10 years.

University graduates are in great demand in our modern economy, but up to now we don't seem to have been able to elect a government which will do all that is necessary to smooth the path of our young people to a university education.

If only an additional 1.75 per cent per year in university operating funding – that is, five per cent instead of 3.25 per cent – were forthcoming from government, there would be no need for the latest round of tuition fee increases.

Consequently, let us hope that the government which, after the recounts, we ultimately elected on June 9 will have the foresight to give this relief to our students. Both they and our economy need and deserve it.

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Published June 11, 2003

Society Must Rein In Education Costs

by

Desmond Morley

This week, despite tuition fee increases averaging more than seven per cent over last year, 23,000 students will enrol in New Brunswick's four universities to either commence or continue their studies.

Having seen a slight downward trend in the late 1990's, enrolments rose again in the first two years of the new Millennium, even though the size of the 18-24 year-old age cohort continued to decline. No doubt this recent reversal of the downward trend has resulted from a compensating increase in the "participation rate" – the percentage of eligible individuals actually enrolling. (Reportedly, the University of New Brunswick alone is expecting a 30 per cent increase in first-year enrolments this Fall.)

According to Human Resources Development Canada, in 2002 a total of 97 per cent of the university graduates in the New Brunswick labour force were employed – 87 per cent of them full time.

In the last decade, the number of university graduates employed in this province has risen from slightly more than 40,000 to nearly 58,000. Granted, the overall size of the labour force has expanded during that time, but not by the 45 per cent or so which would have been required for it to absorb a similar increase in university graduates without a corresponding increase in its demand for academic qualifications.

In fact, the number of employed university graduates has grown, and will continue to grow, regardless of fluctuations in the size of the labour force. For example: as they retire, nurses in New Brunswick who did not obtain Bachelor of Nursing degrees will only be replaced by individuals who have done so.

As society clamours for more and better educational credentials, the proportion of university graduates in the workforce can only continue to grow; and soon there may be a bigger demand for them than there is a supply. Reportedly, in the United States last year there were a million challenging, well-paid jobs which were not filled because qualified personnel could not be found.

Consequently, former New Brunswick premier Senator Louis J. Robichaud had good reason to suggest recently that the federal and provincial governments should put their heads together to offer free university tuition.

Senator Robichaud observed that, at present, only students with means can participate in higher education, and that many students with the potential to succeed cannot afford the cost.

He is right.

Owing to the relatively easy availability of loan financing, a university education is accessible to just about everyone with the academic capability to be admitted. Accessible, however, does not mean affordable. As provincial Liberal education critic and respected former student leader Kelly Lamrock, MLA (Fredericton-Nashwaak) points out, university students who graduate with debt loads of the order of \$40,000 are not uncommon. He compares this with starting our working lives with a \$40,000 mortgage before we even have a full-time job.

In the last few days, Conservative MP John Herron (Fundy-Royal), New Brunswick's seemingly indefatigable federal advocate for the proper funding of post-secondary education, has unveiled a policy paper which, generally speaking, proposes meaningful increases in core funding for post-secondary education, improved student financial aid, and student debt load reduction strategies.

For a long time, the university community has acknowledged the reality that education is a lifelong continuum which does not come to a shuddering halt at the end of the high-school years; and that, in its formal stages, its delivery at an affordable cost – and preferably at no cost at all – should be a priority of governments at all levels.

It is rewarding, therefore, that some of our politicians - from different generations, political persuasions, and levels of government - now appear to have arrived at the same conclusion.

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Published September 2, 2003

Universities Need More

by

Desmond Morley

The baby of the family turns 40 this year. Its oldest member is considerably older than that, but still participates fully in its day-to-day operations.

The family's presence is province-wide, and its activities have affected, directly or indirectly, the lives of all New Brunswickers for generations. Furthermore, as its importance in the economy grows, so does the measure of its influence.

No, it doesn't have a fishing camp on the Restigouche.

The seven members of this family are the campuses of New Brunswick's four universities: the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton and Saint John; Mount Allison University in Sackville; St. Thomas University in Fredericton; and l'Université de Moncton in Edmundston, Moncton and Shippagan.

At the recent fall convocation of l'Université de Moncton, founded in 1963, its president referred to the institution's youth and stated that, nevertheless, it has deep roots.

Indeed, it does have deep roots, as do all our province's universities; and they enjoy a level of support among the public-at-large exceeded solely - and then only marginally - by that given to health care.

For good reason.

According to the New Brunswick Review, the quarterly publication of the New Brunswick Branch of the Pan Canadian Operations Branch of Human Resources Development Canada, between January and August, 2003 Canada's labour market improved in comparison with the same period in 2002. As a result, the unemployment rate across Canada fell slightly.

In contrast, however, during the same period the unemployment rate in New Brunswick actually rose by three times the amount by which it had otherwise fallen nationwide.

HRDC reports that the overall unemployment rates in New Brunswick in 2001 and 2002 (the most recent years for which figures are available) were, respectively, 11.2 per cent and 10.4 percent. Yet in those years, the corresponding unemployment rates for university graduates were only 4.1 percent and 3.3 per cent.

Nevertheless, two studies recently published by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, one in 2001 and the other earlier this year, show that 15 per cent more students had to borrow to complete their university degree in 1999 than in 1996 and that, on average, they also borrowed almost 25 per cent more, even after allowing for inflation; \$20,918 in 1999 as opposed to \$16,814 in 1996.

Given the importance of a university education in the labour market, as demonstrated by the foregoing HRDC figures, this state of affairs is both incomprehensible and unacceptable in a society which supposedly recognizes that its future depends on economic growth.

Let's give credit where credit is due. The Lord government is in the process of giving an increase in operating funding of the order of 13.5 per cent to this province's universities over a four-year period. Grateful as the university community may be, though, this simply is not enough to meet the rising costs of providing a university education to everyone who is qualified to receive one.

As a result, more and more of the financial burden is being thrust onto the unwilling shoulders of the students.

Granted, there has been a trend towards declining enrolments which has hiccupped up and down over the last few years. Nevertheless, declining enrolments - and there is no guarantee that they will continue to decline as the economy demands more and more university graduates - are an insufficient rationale for government failing to provide adequate funding to cover the rising costs of running a university.

Unless and until enrolments fall to such a radical extent that we have to consider equally radical alternative means of delivering what they provide, the maintenance of our universities must continue to be the responsibility, primarily, of government.

It is unfair that university students should be forced to pay an exponentially-increasing portion of the cost of their education, on the pretext that they are its major beneficiaries.

They are not.

Society as a whole benefits from it most of all.

Desmond Morley is the Executive Director of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.

Published November 6, 2003

Education Can Help Cure Health Care Woes

by

Desmond Morley

Hand in hand with the massive demonstration in front of the New Brunswick legislature, expressing outrage at the possibility that the Lord government may close, and downgrade or replace four hospitals in the upper river valley, some lifelong Tories threatened to resign from the party if the government accepts the recommendations of the local hospital board which proposes such changes.

In response, Health Minister Elvy Robichaud stated that his decisions in regard to this controversial issue will reflect his concern solely for the health of all the citizens of that area, and not for that of his party in those ridings.

It has been said that a politician thinks of the next election, but a statesman thinks of the next generation. M. Robichaud, it seems, falls into the latter category.

If M. Robichaud is genuinely concerned about the health of future generations of New Brunswickers, though, he should be looking beyond the immediate storm-in-a-teacup over the distribution of hospital services.

According to Education Indicators in Canada, the report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program 2003 recently released and authored by the Canadian Education Statistics Council, at 6.6 percent Canada spent more of its gross domestic product on education in 1999-2000 than did any of the other G-7 countries including the USA.

This, however, is not necessarily good news.

Canadian students hardly benefit at all from how much more than other countries this nation as a whole allocates to this particular social envelope. The relative handful of them who are going to be competing directly in the international economy may be, notionally, better educated than their foreign counterparts, but that's about it.

The provinces have constitutional jurisdiction over education here in Canada. However, it's only increases in the percentage of any given province's GDP from which they are likely to benefit. Provincial statistics often fail to reflect the rosy international picture painted in the report.

Here in New Brunswick, for example, the percentage of the provincial GDP allocated to post-secondary education has actually fallen almost by 17 percent in the last ten years.

However, in the year 2000 the provinces spent two percent more of the overall GDP on health care than they did education for the first time ever. As the population of New Brunswick - as is the case in the rest of Canada - ages at an ever-accelerating rate, no doubt this trend towards an allocation of resources which is increasingly biased in favour of health care at the expense of the education envelope is likely to grow as the years go by.

Nevertheless, to follow this particular social policy path too slavishly would be extremely shortsighted.

Successive studies conducted worldwide, both by the private and public sectors, have shown that an educated population is, generally speaking, a healthy population.

The Lord government is currently experiencing some short-term difficulties with its health care options for the immediate future. Putting enough resources into education at all levels, however, will eliminate many of the long-term health care problems which are sure to arise if they do not.

The release of \$46 million earmarked for capital projects in the education portfolio that was announced this week by Finance Minister Jeannot Volpé, is a major step in the right direction.

Let us hope it is spent wisely.

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