

University Funding Boost Urgent

The Liberals didn't win the last federal election.

The opposition parties lost it; for want, variously, of leadership, policies, credibility, a nationwide agenda, and other such niceties upon which Canadian voters usually insist when electing their national government.

Although government ignoring the clearly articulated priorities of the voters is not altogether uncommon, one still is at a loss, then, to understand why the narrowly re-elected, fragile government of Paul Martin (which becomes potentially more fragile by the day, as the C-PAC television channel continues its assiduous coverage of the alleged sponsorship excesses of the government of Jean Chrétien) did not use the recent federal Budget to address the unquestionable inadequacy of federal funding for post-secondary education.

Had it done so, it would have taken a major step towards improving the competitiveness of Canada's workforce, both internally and in the global economy, and - now that health care has been satisfactorily resolved for the immediate future - at the same time would have put the foremost priority of all Canadians, regardless of political affiliation, squarely in the vanguard of public imperatives.

In October 2004, a Decima poll of 2000 Canadians, said to be accurate within 2.2 percentage points 19 times out of 20, revealed that

- Among all Canadian households with children, the largest number (25%) said "Making post-secondary education more affordable" should now be the first priority of government. Only 22% said "Reducing unemployment and poverty" was more urgent, and "Cutting taxes" enjoyed only 18% support.
- More than half of all Canadians, and six out of ten Atlantic Canadians, believe that "Every qualified student should be guaranteed a place in a university or college even if that means spending more tax money".
- Most Canadians, and an even greater number of Atlantic Canadians, (30% and 38%, respectively) believe that the best way to ensure all qualified individuals can obtain a

university or college education is to "Increase university and college funding so fees can be lowered".

The respective overall Canadian, and Atlantic Canadian, levels of support for less popular options are as follows: tax breaks to students, 26% and 22%, non-repayable grants to students 21% and 16%; and increases in available loan amounts, 19% and 20%. (The "don't knows" were 3% and 4%).

In the run-up to the election which preceded the poll, therefore, the prime minister appeared to be enlightened to the point of prescience with regard to the issue of post-secondary funding.

On June 4th, 2004 in a nationally televised CBC Newsworld broadcast, Mr. Martin agreed that post-secondary education needed more funding, and declared that he wanted to increase transfers to the provinces for that purpose by way of a dedicated transfer for education - even going so far as to state that he intended to inject, eventually, between \$7 Billion and \$8 Billion into the system.

Eventually. Ay, there's the rub, as Hamlet might say.

Of course, Mr. Martin is only one politician among many to have allowed a higher - even if only marginally higher - level of popularity among the electorate than that enjoyed by their immediate rivals to mislead them, seemingly inexplicably, into shelving some of the things which both the electorate demonstrably believes to be critically important, and for which funds are abundantly available after years of budget surpluses.

It once was said of the late Yasser Arafat that he had "never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity". It remains to be seen whether or not the Liberal government will do everything it can, during its current mandate, to avoid similar condemnation for failing to treat post-secondary underfunding with the urgency the public is demanding.

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