

## 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.