

LORD SHOWS STATESMANSHIP IN EDUCATION

There is an old saying that a politician thinks of the next election, while a statesman thinks of the next generation.

If so, the recent simultaneous release of both the report of the Working Group on Accessibility to Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick and the official response to it of the provincial government were marked by indications of what may, in fact, be statesmanship.

The report itself contains eighteen recommendations, to each of which the Lord government has responded, to a lesser or greater degree, positively.

One recommendation, that the government invest significant new money in student assistance focusing primarily on bursaries for students most in need, has been answered with the allocation over the next three years of an additional \$5.1 Million in non-repayable student financial assistance.

The response to another recommendation, that a fund be established to match monies raised from the private sector by educational institutions, has resulted in the allocation of \$1 Million in public money for this purpose over the next 2 years.

These two are the most tangible responses to the reports' recommendations.

It has not gone unnoticed, however, that foremost among the recommendations of the report is that government take the initiative to work with institutions to publicize "the lifelong advantages that a post-secondary education brings in terms of career options, income, health and personal satisfaction" and "the importance of post-secondary education to New Brunswick's socio-economic wellbeing".

The establishment of a permanent web site to ensure that this information is passed on,

particularly to middle- and high-school students, and an aggressive "promotional strategy", also figure prominently in the recommendations.

In 1997, with the help of the university administrations and student groups and in collaboration with Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) - N.B. Branch and Fundy Community Television (as they then were known), university faculty in New Brunswick produced a video program in both official languages entitled "At the Doorstep of the 21st Century" which

demonstrated the socio-economic advantages of a post-secondary education.

The program was aired several times on the Cable TV network, and copies of the video presentation were sent, through the Department of Education, to each high school in the province.

Consequently, it is in this renewed commitment by the Department of Education to the ongoing promotion of post-secondary education, which obviously is intended to produce an increased demand for post-secondary education which will long survive the next provincial election, that the seeds of statesmanship appear to have germinated.

Premier Bernard Lord showed his personal interest in this topic by participating with Education Minister Elvy Robichaud - whose own enthusiasm also was obvious - in the news conference at which these initiatives were announced.

Mr. Lord, acknowledging that he was passionately committed to the issue, not only reminded his audience that he had been a co-founder of the New Brunswick Student Alliance, but also confirmed that he had never lost sight of his principles as a student activist.

The Premier underscored this by saying that the two percent increase in government operating funding scheduled to go to universities in the 2001-2002 fiscal year was the absolute minimum which the province would give, and that if possible it would be increased. These announcements could not have been more timely.

Within the last few weeks HRDC has confirmed that, although employment for university graduates has increased by 44% since 1990, and "the better educated people are, the better their situation on the labour market", nevertheless there has been a decrease in the number of university graduates. It is, therefore, reassuring - and, yes, statesmanlike - that amid short-term approaches the Lord government has introduced long-term measures to reverse the trend of falling university enrolments which, without doubt, have occurred as a result of a chronic shortage of government funding and prohibitive increases in tuition fees to compensate for it.

It is also encouraging that, in the Premier's case, his student ideals appear to have avoided their most frequent burial place, the grave of graduation.

Time will tell.

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