

READERS' FORUM

By
Claude Dionne

The Premier's Platinum Medal for Research Excellence promised in the 2001 provincial Budget will recognize some of the province's outstanding senior researchers.

Every year for the next six years, two of them will each receive \$1 Million, spread over a two-year period, to further their work.

The Premier's Platinum Medal, targeted at senior researchers, will complement the existing Premier's Research Excellence Awards; these already support the province's most promising young researchers.

Unfortunately, the province in question is Ontario, not New Brunswick.

The positive aspect of this news is that, somewhere at least, meaningful sums are being spent on research from which we all will ultimately benefit.

The negative aspect is that the millions of dollars being spent on research at this time in Ontario - and elsewhere in North America - provide a compelling incentive to young, and perhaps not-so-young, New Brunswick university faculty to evaluate their own research facilities; and, realizing how woefully inadequate they are in many cases, to jump ship to take advantage of the relatively generous subsidies being allocated to research outside this province.

Ontario Premier Mike Harris is reported to have said that this research initiative will help "Ontario's best and brightest young researchers build top-notch research teams."

Consequently, it does not stretch the imagination too much to acknowledge that this anticipated team-building effort is also likely to involve the recruitment of some of New Brunswick's finest minds to the ranks of Ontario's "best and brightest".

It can be argued, of course, that many of them will not relocate because there are so many social compensations - clean air, no traffic jams, and so forth - which attach to living in this province.

This is true - but not for everyone.

As the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations pointed out to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance during the latter's recent public hearings in Halifax, many talented academics are, at best, frustrated with the paucity of research facilities and funding which are available to them in the Atlantic region; and, at worst, some of

them feel they are squandering the talents with which they have been endowed by staying here.

Either of these sentiments already has been a sufficient reason for the departure for greener pastures of many of our faculty members - and if we fail to recognize this reality, we are deluding ourselves.

Worse still, the flight of faculty from New Brunswick - the retention problem - probably is the lesser of two similar problems with which university administrators, seeking to maintain at desirable levels the numbers and quality of faculty in this province, are currently wrestling.

The other is that of recruitment.

Even in the best-case scenario, where no migration of our existing faculty would take place, New Brunswick's universities still will be forced to accommodate a wave of retirements, expected to be of the order of 50%, over the next 10 years.

Who is going to replace them?

Certainly not academics from Ontario, who are relatively awash in research funding from their provincial government and have little reason to leave there.

Not from Quebec either, in several disciplines: there, a five-year provincial income-tax holiday has been given to Science faculty members recruited from outside the province.

There may, though, be some help on the way.

The federal government, urged by Fredericton MP Andy Scott and other parliamentarians, appears to be willing to re-examine its role in funding research, through the Canada Foundation for Innovation and other funding vehicles, with a view to making sponsorship under these programs more readily accessible to university researchers in the Atlantic provinces.

If so, such changes would result in a substantial levelling, for Atlantic universities, of the playing field in the game of faculty retention and recruitment in Canada.

Therefore, let us hope they are made as soon as possible.

(Dr. Claude Dionne, a professor in the Department of Administration and Director of MBA programs at l'Université de Moncton, is currently the President of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.)