

Paul Martin and the role of education in today's modern society

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

CHARLOTTETOWN (CUP) - The promotion of a thriving student class is the most important priority for a successful modern society, says Canada's federal finance minister.

"In the knowledge economy your greatest natural resource is in fact your younger minds," said Paul Martin in an exclusive interview with Canadian University Press. "So they [students] really are the number one priority as far as I'm concerned."

In Charlottetown to address a University of Prince Edward Island Business Society function, Martin stressed his government's commitment to the funding of education.

During his interview with CUP, Martin pointed to diverse government programs aimed at helping students pay tuition, making the student loan system more accessible and flexible, and helping academic institutions with infrastructure and basic research programs.

"We have made it very clear that our priority, as a government is, in fact, education and health

care," the finance minister said.

When asked about criticisms of the Millennium Scholarship Foundation, Martin said the problem lies with the provinces.

He encouraged people to voice their displeasure if their province reduces a student's provincial loan by the same amount they receive from the federal

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millennium fund, as is the case in Ontario.

"I just don't think that's acceptable that the provinces would take that money out of the pockets of students," he said. "I think it is incredibly short sighted and I think that people ought to say that."

Martin also critiqued the provinces for a "lack of recognition

of the importance of higher education."

The Millennium scholarships were supposed to be new money, Martin said, on top of the existing help students now have in paying back their tuition.

He also defended the Canadian Health and Social Transfers (CHST) program, which provides federal money to the provinces, as a successful and important tool to fund of universities.

"Education is not removed from the CHST, the CHST has education very much in mind," he said.

"We are increasing the transfers to the provinces, every single year in the last four years we have increased those transfers and it's our intention to keep on doing that."

As to the issue of whether

education should be treated as a social program, along the same lines as health care, Martin spoke of a difficulty in distinguishing between social and economic programs.

He reinforced, however, his belief that education is the crucial building block to a fruitful society.

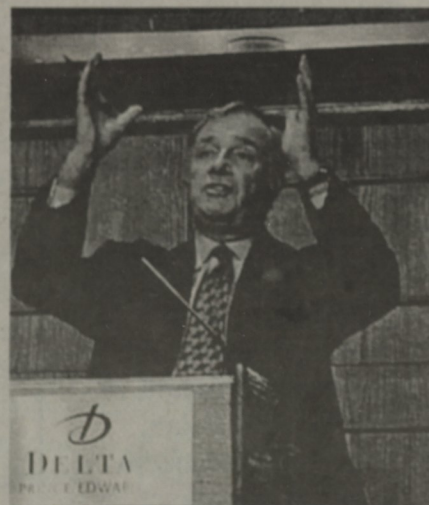
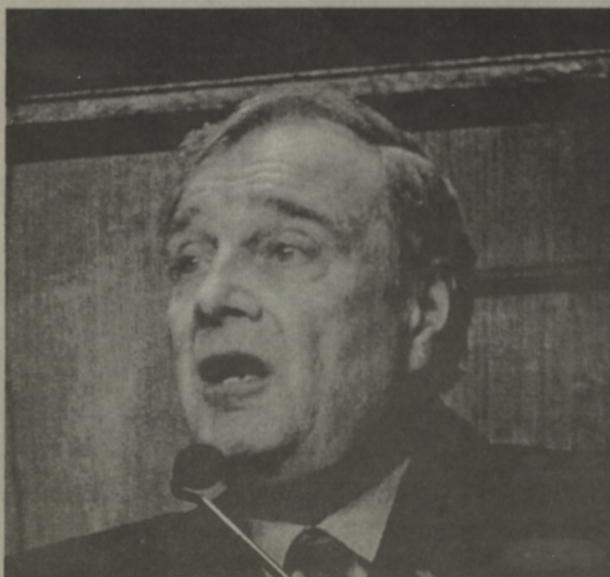
"You cannot build a modern society, let alone a modern economy unless you invest in people's minds," he said. "[But] the line where social programs drop off and economic programs begin or vice versa is probably grey. There is not a clear delineation, but education is essential if you are going to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor."

Martin also emphasized that governments, at all levels, need to understand the importance of a financial commitment to the funding of higher education.

When asked about the exemption of students from the Bankruptcy Act, which has angered many groups including the Canadian Federation of Students, Martin defended the exemption.

"While students are incurring loans, interest is forgiven," he said.

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Canada's Minister of Finance, Paul Martin addresses the 23rd annual Business Society Luncheon

