

Nfld government puts \$4-million into scholarships

BY MICHAEL CONNORS

ST. JOHN'S (CUP) — In a provincial budget that gave a little something to everyone, the Newfoundland government promised \$4-million in scholarships for post-secondary students but no tuition freeze.

The government will provide enough money for 4,000 need- and merit-based awards worth up to \$1,000 each, Finance Minister Paul Dicks announced in the March 26 budget speech. The program, to be active for the next two years, will bridge the funding gap between next fall and the year 2000, when the Ot-

tawa-sponsored Millennium Fund is due to start.

The actual form the scholarship program will take and the criteria for tapping into the funds, however, have not been set. These matters will be determined over the summer by a committee of education stakeholders that will include.

"I do think there has been a very substantial investment here on behalf of students," Premier Brian Tobin said. "I think we've listened to the representation we've heard and I would be disappointed if that were not acknowledged. And I think it will be by the student leadership."

Student leaders, who were expecting no more than a \$500,000 scholarship following the throne speech two weeks ago, say they were surprised at the amount of money the government put into the program.

"We went into the budget expecting the worst," Tracey O'Reilly, Memorial University's student union president, said. "We've been lobbying for a grant system for a long time. We said, 'If you're going to do this, you have to do it right.' There's no sense in putting just \$500,000 in, and that's what they were talking about."

But O'Reilly adds this new scholarship program has the same problem as the Millennium Fund because it overlooks students who are already built up large debtloads.

"We were pleased that they were now recognizing the problem, but at the same time we can't ignore that people

are already in debt, and there's really nothing for them in this budget," she said.

O'Reilly says the state of the province's loan remission program needs to be looked at next, because not enough students are qualifying for it.

Dale Kirby, chair of the Newfoundland component of the Canadian Federation of Students, says the money put into scholarships was better than nothing, but adds the help it provides will be reduced because the government didn't allocate anything to freeze rising tuition fees at the province's only university.

"Any time \$4-million is injected into post-secondary education, it's a good thing," he said. "But it's difficult to support when you look at the fact that they're eliminating \$3-million from Memorial's budget. It's probably a good example of robbing Peter to pay Paul."

Memorial University is entering the final year of a three-year budget plan which has seen its provincial grant cut by \$14-million since 1996. Tuition fees, which currently stand at about \$3,200 a year for a full course load, are scheduled to increase by 5 per cent this summer to offset part of the cut. Memorial's operating budget will be roughly \$100-million next year.

Memorial president Art May says the university can handle this year's cut, but adds if the trend continues, the school will run out of manoeuvring room.

"We must have more money from the government next year or we must change the size and shape of the uni-

versity," he said. "We've pushed tuition fees as hard as they can be pushed. I don't think it's logical for the government to put out [money] for Millennium scholarships, and then for universities to take [it] back through fee increases."

The government did, however, stabilize funding for the provincial public college system, although Kirby says college students could still be looking at a 10 per cent tuition fee increase next fall.

Education Minister Roger Grimes says he understands the budget didn't address all student concerns.

"It won't be to their total satisfaction," he said. "[But] government doesn't have the fiscal capability to institute across-the-board measures such as tuition freezes, or tuition reductions."

Other spending initiatives in the budget included \$2.1-million for youth employment and

\$50-million for construction and upgrading of primary and secondary schools. With a projected deficit of \$10-million next year, the province is also spending money to stabilize health and social programs, increasing social assistance for individuals and families by 7 per cent over the next three years and putting an extra \$30-million into health care.

The budget, which generally spread small amounts of money around to all sectors, also included no new taxes and a 7 per cent pay increase for public servants.

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