

Feds feel student fury on road trip

By Sarah Schmidt

TORONTO (CUP) — Federal politicians returned to Ottawa Wednesday after getting an earful from students across the country during a quick-paced, pulse-checking roving tour of the country.

The five-day, 10 city tour, which saw finance minister Paul Martin's advisors hop from Vancouver to St. John's, was a bumpy trip.

Martin, who has been dubbed the "education minister" for recent quick-fix solutions to an under-funded post-secondary education system, sent members of the House of Commons Finance Committee to hear from the people last week.

"There is no question we're in a new economic era where we can actually debate fiscal dividend," committee chair Maurizio Bevilacqua, said. "Everything is on the table, every idea needs to be explored."

Grandiose ideas and new visions were tabled during the tour, which follows on the heels of Martin's annual economic update delivered last week in Vancouver. Martin announced Canada is approaching a post-deficit era. He predicts a balanced budget by next year and wants to know how the dividend should be spent.

But almost wherever Martin or the committee surfaced, they faced anger about cuts to social spending made in the last few years in the name of deficit reduction.

"Social justice has fallen off the table," Gerald Vandezende of the Citizens for Public Justice said at the Toronto hearings earlier this

week. "The Liberals have abandoned their values."

"I think this committee may want to interview that man," he added about a homeless man Vandezende passed on his way to the hearings.

And Martin's pseudotitle of education minister was symbolically stripped from him by irate students. "He got grilled," Mark Veercamp, treasurer of the British Columbia component of the Canadian Federation of Students, said about Martin's stop at Simon Fraser University.

"It's putting a fire out with an eye dropper," he added about the merit-based \$1-billion Millennium Scholarship Fund recently announced, which he sees as a flashy, quick-fix initiative that does nothing to repair the damage the Liberals have done to the post-secondary system.

Martin has presided over federal budgets which have resulted in \$2.29-billion cut from post-secondary education since the Liberals came to power in 1993. And during his tenure as finance minister, tuition fees have risen by 45 per cent across the country and student debt loads are up 70 per cent.

Marjorie Brown, a member of the federation's national executive and president of the University of Regina Students Union, had a similar message for members of the committee when it hit Saskatchewan days later.

She stressed the federal deficit has been shifted to the backs of students and other ordinary Canadians, an argument echoed by four other federation spokespeople in hear-

ings elsewhere in the country this week.

But sandwiched in-between this message was an outpouring of anger from members of the University of Calgary's Reform club. When Martin arrived on the campus, he was heckled by members of the Young Reformers.

"We tried to get our message across," said Brendan Cassidy about the Young Reformers call for the abolition of the Canadian Pension Fund and an across-the-board tax cut.

But it looks like Cassidy and other Reform supporters won't be getting the government's ear anytime soon.

"Canadians have said, Yes, we have paid a big price in terms of the social fabric. And we're not prepared to continue at the expense of tax cuts. That's been the overriding message right across the country," Tony Valeri, a Liberal member of the finance committee and parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Finance, said Wednesday at the end of the tour.

Nelson Riis, a New Democratic member of the finance committee, says if the federal government wants to truly help students, they should be prepared to take drastic measures.

"If the Prime Minister is serious about education, which I think he is, I believe we have to do something big like eliminate tuition fees. Let us do what other countries do and do away with tuition fees to make it truly accessible," he said.

Students irate about youth work experience program

By Kip Bonnell

ST. JOHN'S (CUP) — Student leaders in Newfoundland are questioning the legality of a government funded work-experience program for youth and may pursue the matter in court.

The Student Work and Services Program was introduced in the summer of 1994 to give Newfoundland students an opportunity to earn money and gain career-related experience.

The program, run jointly by the provincial and federal governments, consists of two components, paid employment and community service.

The community service component is what has student leaders upset.

Under the program, students work for non-profit organizations that ideally are related to their field of study. They receive \$50 per week plus a tuition voucher for \$1,400 at the end of the work placement.

Dale Kirby, chair of the Newfoundland component of the Canadian Federation of Students, says he is troubled by the fact that students receive small cash payments during the work term, and in the end receive funds that can only be used for tuition.

"I don't think that people should be forced to be paid with a voucher," Kirby said. "Students should have the freedom of choice."

Students should be given the option of taking the tuition voucher or be paid the equivalent amount through cash installments during the work period, he adds.

Kirby says the federation is presently working with labour groups and lawyers to determine whether there are grounds to challenge the program and its \$50 per week salary under Canada's labour codes.

"We're in the process of investigating the legalities of paying someone \$50 per week, and whether or not that is under minimum wage labour," he said. He adds that if the program is run again next year, a legal challenge may be launched.

A spokesperson for the program, Jill Sooley, says the provincial government is quite pleased with the program, adding that students have gained much-needed experience in the workforce through it. "It's actually one of our most successful programs," she said.

But she says that doesn't close the door for anyone who feels there is need for some improvements. "We're happy with the way [the program] is going, however if there are any concerns that we can accommodate, we'd be able to look at them," said Sooley.

On Oct. 23, representatives of the federation and the Memorial University student union will be meeting with the organizers of the program.

Glenn Beck, president of the student union, says he hopes the meeting will be productive, but adds students are willing to take more drastic action if they think it is warranted.

"We're trying to play [the government's] game right now, by sitting on the committees and things like that to ensure student representation," Beck said.

"If that fails, I guess we all have to revert back to some more militant activities to get our message across."