

New Martin Government Promises Aid for Students

By Ryan Gallant
National / International
Reporter

In the Speech from the Throne that marked the opening of Paul Martin's first parliamentary session as Prime Minister, the new government has pledged its support for students, aboriginals, the environment, and Canadian cities.

Mr. Martin, who many expected to front more politically-right policies than the government of former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, surprised some analysts by turning the focus of his mandate to social programs. A system to improve access to post secondary education and to enhance the student loan process was proposed, stating that the government will look at a combination of a strengthened RESP grant program and a more accessible student loan policy that would increase loan limits for Canadian students. The renewed program would put emphasis on aiding students from lower income families, especially those looking at entering into their first year, and who may not otherwise have an equal-opportunity of admission to a post secondary educational facility. While this is a step in the right direction, critics charge that this measure will only help future students, doing little to ease the debt of current students attending university.

The speech also outlined the government's intention to implement a GST tax-break for Canadian municipalities, a deal that could see Canadian cities saving \$7 billion over ten years (this could see the City of Charlottetown save up to \$400,000 this year alone). It hinted, though vaguely, at shifting toward Aboriginal self-government, and at increased protection of children, especially on the internet. It looked

at expanding subsidized daycare and community programs, as well as at the development of training programs for disabled people.

The speech reaffirmed the government's commitment to the Kyoto Protocol and to cleaning up toxic waste sites in Canada, earmarking \$500 million over ten years to clean up the Sydney tar ponds and maintaining Chrétien's guarantee of \$3.2 billion to aid in cleanups across the country. It also vowed to secure immediate capital investments for the Canadian military and to reform parliament, and announced the additional \$2 billion being channeled into health care pursuant his meeting with the premiers earlier this year.

While it received accolades from municipal governments and the Assembly of First Nations, as well as from many student and environmental groups, some speculated over the legitimacy of the promises made in Martin's inaugural Speech from the Throne, dismissing much of it as already-existing Liberal policy.

Members of the business community were surprised by some of the announcements, perhaps expecting more favourable policies for corporate Canada from the business-savvy Martin.

NDP leader Jack Layton also questioned the government's motives and rejected Martin's contribution to cities as being inadequate. "Cities need a flow of funds coming in from the federal government and they only have a promise of a discussion of the gas tax," he was quoted as saying in *The Globe and Mail*. Interim Conservative Party leader Dr. Grant Hill also attacked the speech, calling the promises in it "legacy leftovers and puffy promises." He argued that the GST tax-break would do little to aid smaller towns that are in dire need of the money and that the additional

money that was allocated to the Canadian Forces was insufficient. "We have helicopters that can't go up, submarines that can't go down and a government that sends its soldiers to a desert in jungle fatigues," asserted Hill in the House of Commons.

Both Layton and Hill pointed to the speech as being nothing more than election rhetoric, and many political analysts agree, saying Martin's left-leaning tendencies for this parliamentary session could steal some of the steam from the NDP.

Consistent with this view, a few controversial issues were left out of the government's outlining policy. The glaring omissions

include same-sex marriages, the decriminalization of marijuana and a restructuring formula for the national gun registry, items that a great majority of the electorate has strong opinions about.

Indeed keeping quiet on such issues could aid the Martin government in maintaining some popularity, but many ask how long Canadians will wait before being afforded an answer. Martin's plans for his government and for the rest of Canada are expected to be outlined further in a budget later this month. At the time of the throne speech many expected a federal election by mid-May.

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