

Minister of education speaks on student aid

Milligan appears willing to listen and to not back privatized financial assistance

BY BRUCE DAVISON

AMID A GREAT DEAL OF uncertainty about the future of student aid in P.E.I., Minister of Education Keith Milligan met with members of the UPEI Student Union Council on Friday, February 18 in the Sports Centre boardroom. Ontario, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick have all recently eliminated their provincial bursary programs and rumours have been circulating for quite some time that P.E.I. would soon be doing the same.

Early on in his speech, Milligan acknowledged that increases in student assistance have not kept pace with sharply rising tuition and other costs faced by students. He then stated that a problem facing his government was (as he put it): "What can we do to make more money available to the student body?" Complicating any discussion of possible solutions, he contended, was the federal proposal that all student assistance would be cost-shared between the federal and provincial governments, 60 and 40 per cent respectively. A system operating on those lines would result in much higher costs for PEI, as presently only students who are able to qualify for the

maximum amount available under Canada Student Loans are eligible for any provincial assistance (through a bursary).

Milligan outlined two options for reform of student assistance in P.E.I.. First, the government could simply leave the present system in place and ignore the fact that educational costs have and continue to rise sharply every year. Second, "looking at diminishing the amount of bursary available and increasing the amount of loan that would be available to reflect the costs of post-secondary education." "No matter what the options are," he continued to state, "we know it's going to cost us more money and it will probably end up, no matter which choices we make, with larger debts belonging to students. Those are the unenviable choices."

The Provincial Director of Student aid, Dave MacPherson, who had accompanied Mr. Milligan, then further explained the increased costs that may be incurred by the province if the 60/40 federal provincial split was adopted by stating "if we up the allowances and go to a 60/40, the cost would be phenomenal for the province." MacPherson also referred to the

present allowances available to students, saying that they were "pretty stale and out of date and [that they] certainly don't reflect the reality of going to school." The Minister later added that a combined loan would perhaps reach a maximum of eight thousand dollars. The Minister also related that he had recently met with the Federal Minister of Human Resources and Labour and indicated to him that PEI would be interested in serving as a pilot project. Milligan explained that he had suggested that 18-25 year-olds could be allowed to use unemployment insurance funds to finance school. While he said that the federal government is willing to consider this proposal, it must be stressed that there is no indication that this program will be adopted.

The meeting then turned to the Minister asking the students how they felt about the possibility of a provincial loans program and higher allowances being available to students. Student Union President Todd King, citing a brief by UPEISU Vice President External Tara O'Connor, asked the Minister about the recent student aid reforms in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In both of these provinces provincial

student loans are now administered by the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (and for francophones in New Brunswick by the Casse Populaires). In Nova Scotia alone 781 students who were already in school were denied provincial student loans after bank-run credit checks. The provincial government has stepped in to guarantee these students loans, but it seems very unlikely that this will be done next year. Milligan seemed to indicate that a system similar to those in these two provinces was not an option for PEI, saying "I did think, personally speaking, of privatizing the student loan portfolio." He did also admit that it was impossible for him alone to give categorical assurances that this would not occur.

The meeting ended with Mr. Milligan indicating, in response to a question from this reporter, that he thought it would be a good idea for a "town hall" session on campus to discuss cost-cutting and student aid reform with students. In response to a question and a point from Student Union Vice President Finance Ryan Bradley that education was more of an "investment" than a "cost," Milligan agreed-- perhaps a hopeful sign.



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