

Generation Debt: Education For What

by Marcella Munro.

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Education for What?

ICRP specifically -- and the government's proposals in general have nothing to do with increasing access to university or college. They are aimed at ending the notion of shared responsibility for higher education, and placing the onus squarely on the individual. Like the rest of the Axworthy and Martin plans for social security reform, the planned changes in PSE aren't rooted in any ethical or socially conscious vision of people's needs or aspirations. They're rooted in a specific view of the future of the economy and the job market -- one in which social policy is merely a tool for producing the kind of worker the business community wants, rather than to promote dignity, equality or pluralism.

"[Axworthy's document] is not a social policy document," says economist Harold Chorney. "It's a finance document. It's created by the economists in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and their friends here in Ottawa who then surround it with the flesh of social policy. But the whole thrust of it is that inflexible labour markets cause unemployment."

The "flexible" worker the OECD and business community seeks is one who will spend a lifetime in vocational training and retraining to "adapt" to business needs, not a critical thinker who has been to college or university and may come to question the value of having constantly to change skills because business demands it.

The *OECD Jobs Study*, an innocuous-looking publication that few have heard about, is quietly setting the agenda for the industrialized world's version of structural adjustment. Its prescription for PSE? The authors call for "a better balance between post-secondary education and training" and lament the growth in academic studies, warning against a "surplus of academic qualifications". The OECD wants universities and colleges to become mass training grounds to "prepare and stimulate students for entrepreneurial activities".

When you put this into the context of the OECD's other suggestions -- which basically amount to forcing people into what they call "low-productivity, low-wage jobs" -- it becomes clear that the Liberal government's plans have little to do with allowing everyone access to PSE. While the Liberals tax poetic about universal education opportunity giving Canadians a "com-

petitive edge", they seem to be doing everything they can to discourage people from seeking a college or university education.

"University and college are just not the options being put forward to people on UI or social assistance," says Regent Park's Seguin. "They are being told to take the provincial workfare-type programs, not to enroll in college or university courses."

The goal isn't to let people have the choices and opportunities higher education offers, but to use the language of access as an excuse to keep PSE elitist, and force poor people into the low-paying training positions offered by programs such as NB Works in New Brunswick.

With its warning about a "surplus of academic qualifications", the OECD study makes it clear that in the "new global economy" the idea of learning for the sake of developing a better understanding of the world is passe. While education and training are at least rhetorically at the center of the policies the government is trying to promote, it's not meant to expand the choices people will have, or their general knowledge. Education is merely viewed as the tool to shape the labour market to the demands of business. Gone is the idea of meaningful work, or even career choice. With 1.5 million Canadians unemployed and poverty on the rise, people are desperate enough to accept the lifeline of education and training, even if it will give them only unstable and unfulfilling jobs. The government knows this, and reminds Canadians repeatedly of it throughout the green paper. "Individuals will have an active role in creating their own career security, based on a willingness to expand and improve their employment skills. If they fail to do so," warns the green paper, "they will risk being left behind in the workplace, thereby risking lower wages or job loss.

United We Stand

It's true that a college or university education won't guarantee anyone access to a job any more. Today 42.4 percent of the unemployed have some post-secondary education, compared with 19 per cent back in 1980.

The government's own figures show people with university or college degrees have longer lifetime earnings, and the chance of a better job at better wages, which is more than can be said of retraining or programs such as the federally financed Self-Sufficiency Project in British Columbia and New Brunswick. This program provides businesses with subsidies to hire welfare recipients for short "training" periods. Although the government will

spend \$30,000 to \$37,000 a year on each person in the program, at the end there is no guarantee of a job. At least after university or college, you have a piece of paper, a larger fund of knowledge and greater self-confidence.

In arguing for the privatization of PSE and for the rationalization of what's taught and to whom, the federal government and others are throwing up their hands and surrendering to the individualistic view of education and social policy that is widely prevalent in the United States. Jeffrey Simpson, in his *Globe and Mail* column, makes the inevitable comparison with the US as he lectures students to take more individual responsibility for education funding. What Simpson doesn't mention is the way the US model of PSE has created a two-tiered system of education -- the elite ivy-league one for the rich, and an inferior one for the rest of society.

As with all social programs, the real comparisons in the realm of education are to be made with countries in Europe. The European nations have a wider view of both the importance of education and the value of social spending in general. And although these countries are under as much economic pressure as Canada, they continue to see the funding of education as an important investment in the future. Most countries in Europe have very low -- some non-existent -- tuition fees. At the same time, the percentage of the budget for higher education going to student assistance and scholarships is much higher than in Canada. Holland, for example, spends nearly four times what Canada does to ensure its citizens have access to higher education.

The green paper implies we spend too much on higher education, and quotes a study saying Canada ranks first in spending among the OECD nations. If you look at government spending alone, however, we are in the middle of the pack, and our perstudent spending on higher education has been in decline for the past 20 years.

Although the federal government acts as if we have "no choice" but to allow federal block funding for PSE to disappear by the turn of the century, there are other options. At a time when more and more professors, students and parents have been calling for national standards for all levels of education, surely one of these options is for the federal government to take a larger role in the funding, quality, accessibility and direction of higher education.

The Canadian Federation of Students has argued for a minimum 3 percent higher education and research corporate tax, which, based on 1990 statistics, would raise \$1.5 million dollars a year for PSE. Its *Strategy*

For Change outlines step by step how the federal government could eliminate tuition fees, restore federal funding to PSE and create a better system of student aid through changes to the tax system, all of which would help improve both the accessibility and the quality of higher education.

Although Axworthy seemed shocked by the demonstration of 13,000 students at Parliament Hill on November 16, they weren't telling him anything he didn't already know. According to the government's own polls, the majority of Canadians still believe PSE is a valuable public good and something the government should be spending more money on. In an August survey the government commissioned, a social security review last July, 69 percent of respondents agreed that "spending on post-secondary education should be maintained at any cost". An earlier poll done by Vector Research for some unions showed that 63 per cent of Canadians are willing to pay more taxes to educate young people.

As a result of more than a decade of cuts, and driven by government obsession with the deficit, Canadians are being asked to question the core values that make this country -- values built into our social programs. Axworthy and the government have picked PSE as their first target for complete dismantling perhaps out of the belief that education is perceived to be elitist. To succeed, however, he will have to convince Canadians that their social programs -- including education -- need to be sacrificed in order to bring down the deficit. And they will not easily be persuaded that "need".

Accessible, affordable higher education is one of our core values as a country, and it may be the one whose impending loss will most effectively rally Canadians behind the struggle to save our social programs. Instead of yelling at the students, Axworthy should have listened to what they were saying. While our economy has been weakened by free trade and high unemployment, people's values haven't really changed. We aren't ready to surrender the social programs that, more than anything else, make Canada a wonderful country in which to live.

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