

# PRESIDENT KEVIN GAUTHIER PRES

Through my position as President of the Student Union at the University of Prince Edward Island, I am here today to represent the views and wishes of the students of my province. Like the representatives who speak on behalf of the New Brunswick Coalition of Students, or the Student Union of Nova Scotia, I have been delegated to speak for the students of an entire province, and it is as a provincial representative that I have come here today.

The University of Prince Edward Island is, relatively speaking, a new university. This year marks the tenth anniversary of our formation, making us one of the junior institutions in the region. Since this is our tenth birthday, we have decided that this is an appropriate time to reflect on what we have done since our formation, what we have become today, and what we may expect in future years. A great deal of research and much effort is being spent in attempting to determine our direction. But even before the results of all this research and effort are realized, one thing is already glaringly obvious: the role and purpose of small, younger institutions like UPEI is being questioned like never before, and their continued existence is becoming increasingly difficult to ensure as the people who administer and finance post-secondary education continue to stumble blindly through the ever more desperate days which we now face, looking for a direction but finding none, searching for guidance but refusing what is offered.

The first institutions to suffer the effects of such developments as severe cutbacks in funding, uncertainty about the role of universities, disillusionment on the part of

students about the prospects for a better life upon graduation, are the small institutions like UPEI. On Prince Edward Island, the effects of these problems are compounded by our youth, since we have not yet established a reputation for academic excellence which might counter these negative trends to some extent. Because we are

small, our faculties and course offerings are limited, our physical facilities are small and unimpressive by comparison, and our services are not as elaborate as those offered by larger universities. We have a Student Union membership of only 1390 full-time



students. We cannot continue to see enrolment drop significantly each year; it is already small, and it can only drop so much more before the continued operation of U.P.E.I. is or should be deemed unfeasible. From our viewpoint, then, any development, either planned or unplanned, which serves to increase the decline in enrolment, or which in any other way threatens our existence as a viable, respected institution must be opposed in the strongest possible terms.

One such development that must be opposed without hesitation and as forcefully as possible is the trend we see evolving towards higher tuition fees and more expense for the student through higher student loans.

We are aware that the Commission is undertaking a study of the student loan plan under which we now operate. Although no clear indication of what line the study is taking has yet been given, it may be considered likely that consideration will be given to making the student, through student loans, assume a larger share of the cost of a university education, through such arrangements as the CORSAP plan being studied by the Canadian Association of University Teachers. Although such plans will probably be considered carefully in future, they will be looked at with great

skepticism by students. The present student loan plan already places a great burden on any student who is forced to rely upon it for financing an education. A student who leaves home to attend university on a student loan graduated approximately \$10,000 in debt, with no

guarantee of employment, no promise of a stable income and no idea of how he/she will succeed in society. For most students, a university education is a gamble, and the \$10,000 stake which they must put up is quite large enough without being increased. To force students to draw large student loans is not a plan to be considered seriously. It will not be accepted by students unless some clear guarantee can be given that the education for which we must pay so much will yield a sufficient reward. No such guarantee can yet be given, nor is it foreseeable in the future, so larger student loans are not an alternative that can be accepted at this time.

Another alternative that has already been offered by the Commission is a recommendation that tuition fees increase with the cost of living. With all due respect to the members of the Commission, such a recommendation shows a startling lack of awareness of the problems which we as students face, and with no sympathy calls for a shift of the burden of finance from those who can most easily afford it to those who can least afford it. The recommendation for indexed tuition fees comes at a time when unemployment insurance has been placed beyond the reach of most students, and when wages are failing to keep pace with the cost of living.

In denying any responsibility on our part to pay higher tuition fees, we are not being unreasonable, or lazy, or irresponsible. We are simply saying that we are already over-extended financially, and we cannot afford to pay higher tuition fees each year. Students at UPEI have had to absorb tuition increases in the neighbourhood of ten per cent for the past several years. At the same time, jobs have become less available, and wages have fallen behind the increases in tuition. This is especially true in the tourism and service sectors which employ nearly all students who manage to find summer employment on the Island. In addition to the increases in tuition, students must also absorb much higher increases in the cost of textbooks, supplies, and services, all in addition to the general increase in the cost of living which we all must endure. The cost of attending university involves more than tuition fees, but tuition is the only cost that is regulated. Let us use the ability to regulate this one cost so that students will not be forced to abandon their desire for a university education simply because of the expense. The Commission must reconsider its position on tuition fees, and support students in our efforts to keep a university education within the reach of those who desire it.

The recent trend towards increasing restraint in public funding of post-secondary education is by far the most serious threat that faces universities today. Governments are obsessed with the idea of cutting expenditures in any way possible, and a blind eye is turned toward the consequences. Universities and colleges have suffered greatly, far more than most other public sectors, and whereas the situation has been serious for the past three years, it has now become desperate. It is time for those who are concerned with post-secondary education to stop hiding from the problem, to face the situation squarely, and to demand that this senseless, haphazard, and totally directionless obsession with cutting back be stopped and, as far as possible, reversed. We, as students, have begun our