

NDP reasserts support for PSE as federal budget approaches

By Nick Taylor-Vaisey, *CUP Ottawa Bureau Chief*

OTTAWA (CUP) – In just a few weeks, all eyes in Ottawa will be on Finance Minister Jim Flaherty as he presents the federal budget. NDP MP Denise Savoie, though, is reminding the government that she expects to see strong commitments to student financial assistance.

On Jan. 9, Savoie presented an open letter to Human Resources Minister Monte Solberg in which she reminded him that one of her party's priorities is improving the current student financial assistance regime.

“All Canadians should have equitable access to post-secondary education without a incurring a lifetime of student debt,” read the letter.

Savoie's letter outlined five recommendations for action, several of which also appeared in a petition to the federal government that she supported last summer.

Suggestions include reducing the interest rate on Canada Student Loans; establishing a federal loans ombudsperson; more relief to borrowers during loan repayment; creating standards that hold public and private loan collectors accountable for their conduct; and relaxing loan-repayment requirements to avoid defaults.

In last year's budget, the federal government committed to a review of the Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP) that would “simplify CSLP instruments, make them more effective and ensure integrated administration and efficient delivery.”

Savoie said that the degree to which Budget 2008 lives up to last year's commitment will play a role in whether or not the NDP supports or opposes the bill.

“There is no question that post-secondary education, skills training and literacy are part of our priorities,” she said. “And so it needs to be there for us to support it. You don't ever make a decision about supporting a budget on one issue, but I can say that's one of our priorities.”

Zach Churchill, the national director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, a federal student lobby group, is hopeful that the budget would include money for post-secondary education.

“If there are things in the budget that we support or push for, and that we believe are in the best interests of our members and the students of Canada, then it would be a shame to see that budget fall.”

Churchill said that he was unaware of any specific policy or financial commitments that might appear in the budget, although he hoped the government would avoid more tax cuts, saying that they “help very few students.”

“We really haven't heard what's going to be in the budget, other than that there is going to be support there for students — we're not sure in what form, or what there is going to be for extra funding for post-secondary,” said Churchill.

Solberg made the vague reference to student support in the budget in a meeting with CASA in November. Governor General Michaëlle Jean also recognized the challenges facing post-secondary education in the speech from the throne on Oct. 16.

“The bedrock of our workforce is middle-class Canadians and their families. These families worry about the rising costs of higher education,” she read from the speech.