

## **Harper's third economic report reiterates investments in post-secondary education**

**By Emma Godmere**

**CUP Ottawa Bureau Chief**

**October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009**

OTTAWA (CUP) – Re-emphasizing promised funds for university research and infrastructure investments, the third economic report from Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Conservative government pointed to Canadian youth and post-secondary education as prime examples of economic recovery investments.

Speaking to supporters and journalists in Saint John, N.B. on Sept. 28, Harper emphasized that Canada is seeing “stabilization and modest beginnings of a recovery” after spending months in an economic recession.

The report – third in a series of quarterly reports that the Conservatives agreed to table in last January’s budget vote – boasts that the government has now “committed” 90 per cent of the allotted 2009-10 stimulus funding.

In particular, the economic update points out that 93 per cent of the \$2 billion earmarked for infrastructure investments at Canadian colleges and universities has already been pledged, and that 381 projects have already begun on campuses across the country. Sixty-six projects are expected to start this fiscal year.

“It was encouraging that that [the report] did mention the important role that post-secondary education plays as one of the main planks in long-term economic recovery, and we were kind of relieved that there was no tone in the speech that suggested cuts,” said Katherine Giroux-Bougard, national chairperson for the Canadian Federation of Students.

“Having said that, it was unfortunate that the economic update really didn’t address record-high student unemployment and high student debt.”

According to Statistics Canada, the average unemployment rate for students this summer was 19.2 per cent.

In the “Helping the Unemployed” section of the government’s report, it was indicated that an extra \$10 million was given to the Canada Summer Jobs Program in 2009-10, allowing 40,000 students to be hired for the summer.

“In terms of the increase that was provided in the budget, it basically brought back the level of funding to the same level of funding that was in the program in 2006, before the Conservatives cut into that program,” said Giroux-Bougard.

The government indicated some “new investments” in their report, including \$80.5 million for 2,500 graduate scholarships, and \$21 million to expand the Canada Research Chairs program over the next two years.

“For us, when we talk about graduate funding and research funding, it’s really about ensuring that those students who need it the most get it right now,” said Arati Sharma, national director for the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. “Currently, there’s no needs-based system for graduate students.”

Students were among the groups that Opposition Leader Michael Ignatieff mentioned to reporters on Oct. 1, when he indicated the economic update was another reason behind the Liberals’ motion of non-confidence shortly before debate kicked off in Parliament.

“How do I explain to these people that I keep letting this government go on?” he said, pointing to unemployment as one of the biggest issues currently facing many Canadians.

The Liberals tabled a non-confidence motion the same day the economic update was released. MPs spent Oct. 1 debating the motion, which failed to pass – while the Liberals had the support of the Bloc Quebecois, the NDP ended up abstaining on the vote.