

National PSE strategy? Don't hold your breath

PSE folks have been calling for national direction but Harper's latest moves suggest it's not on the radar

By Carson Jerema | March 6th, 2008 | 2:25 pm
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You wouldn't know it from listening to Canada's amnesiac higher education sector but perhaps the biggest story regarding post-secondary policy to come out of last week's federal budget was what wasn't said.

Think back to last spring when Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced an additional \$800 million for the Canada Social Transfer with the caveat that it would be cordoned off for higher education. A one-time billion dollar transfer for post-secondary infrastructure was also announced. Or, put another way, the PSE sector's Holy Grail.

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Details on what conditions might accompany the new money, we were promised, would be given later, presumably at the next budget. Well the next budget has come and gone (thanks to the Liberal party) and still no details on whether Ottawa will require the provinces to actually spend the money on education, as opposed to, say, roads and sewers.

This should have education advocates up in arms. Calls for a national strategy on higher education have been coming from the sector for years. Suggested initiatives have ranged from some sort of framework to define what constitutes spending on higher education, to enshrining educational standards from coast to coast, to the creation of a federal ministry of education. Canada is the only developed country to have no national education portfolio.

However, aside from a few assorted foot stomps decrying the absence of a coherent Canada-wide vision, the Educational Policy Institute was, evidently, the only group to acknowledge the omission: "suggesting that despite the fanfare that surrounded the creation of a PSE 'transfer,' the federal government actually considers this money to be an unrestricted transfer to the provinces."

Even the Canadian Federation of Students, which issued four media releases on the budget was silent on this issue, despite long calling for a framework to make sure provincial transfer payments are actually being spent on education.

In any event, the lack of an overarching national plan for post-secondary policy,

I would argue, is precisely how the federal government wants it. As a professor of PSE told me in an interview in the fall, “Stephen Harper doesn’t do social policy.” Nope, that is the responsibility of the provinces.

The scrapping of the Millennium Scholarship Foundation is also suggestive of this. Constitutional purists have long found the Fund offensive, not because of its perceived lack of accountability, or its alleged ineffectiveness, but because it is seen as an unnecessary intrusion into provincial responsibilities.

Those wedded to a more classical approach to federalism have argued that the money should have been transferred through adjustments to the equalization scheme, or, failing that, through the Canada Student Loans framework, which is what the Tories have opted to do.

True, the Student Loans program is often considered intrusive in its own right, but it is seen, by those who sleep with the BNA Act under their pillow, as the preferable (if imperfect) way to give grants to students, partly because it is an established program, and partly because banking falls within the powers of the federal government.

Of course this is nothing new. Stephen Harper’s goal of “clarifying” the division of powers and promoting a compartmentalized vision of federalism is widely acknowledged. Earlier this week Tom Flanagan, Harper’s mentor and former chief of staff, proudly announced that the government is well on its way to “re-engineering” the country.

Flanagan argued that because of cuts to the GST, to income and corporate taxes, and the end of massive surpluses, that the federal government is now “boxed in.” The provinces theoretically have more money due to modifications to equalization made last year, and if premiers want to invest more in social programs, they have more tax room to move into. Or so the argument goes.

If withdrawing further from PSE policy indicates affirming provincial responsibilities, the promise in last October’s throne speech to use Ottawa’s trade and commerce power to demolish interprovincial trade barriers is an affirmation of federal power. Classical federalism envisions a national government solely responsible for creating an economic space, with subnational governments tailoring social policy to their specific communities.

While such developments may be attributable to the Harper government, they reflect an ebb back to the constitutional division of powers that has been going on since at least the mid-1980s when the National Energy Program ended. And, as political scientist David Cameron argued in a 2001 paper, higher education serves as a pretty good barometer of the state of federalism in Canada.

In fact, PSE, especially in the past 20 years, resembles something close to exactly what constitutional purists have been calling for in the country more generally. Ottawa largely limits involvement to spending on research, which is justified (most agree rightly so) under the trade and commerce power, and transfer payments for education come void of even the whiff of conditionality (have been for decades).

What's more, the consequences are pretty close to what would be predicted. Provincial systems are tailored to local preferences, be it through B.C.'s convoluted patchwork of universities, university colleges and degree granting community colleges, Ontario's coterie of private institutions, or Quebec's obscenely low tuition fees.

Now, whether or not the rest of the country will look like this when the Harper government is through remains to be seen. As is, if it is even possible (hello Canada Health Act). Or, perhaps, more importantly, if it is desirable.

What is certain, however, is that a national strategy on post-secondary education is as far away as it has ever been.