

## SPEAKING PLAINLY: THE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION REPORT

Disappointment must be running high in government offices in Fredericton for the Premier and his Government have not been well served by the Report of their appointees to the 2007 Post-Secondary Education Commission. Instead of a blueprint for change that could be swiftly implemented to the cheers of most New Brunswickers, the Premier has received a confused and confusing report that has met with great hostility on the part of many stakeholders, including students, and members of his own party. The Premier deserved better. One can only wonder where in the world his political and policy advisers were, for surely the fallout could have been predicted.

To be fair, perhaps the Commissioners should have been given more time. The Deutsch Commission in the early 1960s took more than a year while the current one had only 8 months at best to consult, digest and write a report on matters that have become far more complicated and complex over the previous 45 years. The Commission also should have had at least one resident New Brunswicker with his or her ear to the ground; the earlier Commission had one Francophone and one Anglophone resident as key members in addition to the Principal of Queen's University as chairman.

Both Commissions held public hearings but in addition the Deutsch Commission consulted extensively and frequently with key stakeholders and the institutions, particularly those to be affected in major ways. There were no surprises when the Deutsch Commission Report was released whereas the current Commission's Report dropped like a bombshell and with predictable reverberations. From their comments, it is not too strong to say that the Presidents of UNB and U de M were blindsided in the process and by the current Report, even though their institutions are most strenuously affected, as were the Presidents of Mount Allison and Saint Thomas Universities on several issues related to their institutions. I assume the same is true for the Community Colleges. Worse still, this Commission chose mischievously to leak the contents of the Report to the media in advance of its public release.

The Report itself is seriously flawed. There is no in-depth analysis of the current functioning of the universities or colleges or any analysis of what is wrong with the present system that requires radical surgery. Instead of analysis there are assertions and innuendos, mostly wrong but readily tossed off as inalienable truths:

- Decision-making within universities is too slow for today's fast paced society,
- Universities are unresponsive to change,
- Universities prefer the *status quo*,
- Universities need to do things differently and smarter,
- Post-secondary institutions operate too much within their own silos
- Post-secondary institutions do not work closely with their communities or help facilitate their economic and social development

There is no business plan to indicate the cost of the changes recommended. While there is a ballpark figure of \$50 million in new funding to the institutions through various kinds of grants, there is no indication of the infrastructure costs or capital costs.

For the proposed Polytechnics, particularly the one in Saint John, there is no transition plan to identify:

- A time line for orderly implementation,
- How to deal with the vast array of complex human resource issues,
- The mechanisms for and the costs of splitting up UNB and U de M and the impact such change would have on the larger campuses in Fredericton and Moncton,
- How students already enrolled will be able to complete their programs of study,
- How to deal with a decline in enrolment if students, both domestic and international, are not interested in this new form of education and go elsewhere or, worse still, do not or cannot go on with their education.

In the absence of a transition plan, shock waves are already hitting current students and the recruitment of prospective students. Similarly, it must be very difficult to recruit new faculty and staff members in the highly competitive market that currently exists given the uncertainty of just what UNBSJ will be. For the Commissioners not to have included some transition plan for what would be deeply unsettling organizational changes seems irresponsible and incompetent.

The current Commissioners claim to be visionary but in the eyes of many observers the vision in the Report appears to be vague, blurry, highly theoretical and -in the absence of a business plan and a timetable and mechanism of transition - reckless. So enamored are they of their vision however, the Commissioners insist that the whole is even greater than the parts and that the Premier and his Government need to accept the whole ball of wax – a take it or leave it proposition. The Commissioners sound like missionaries bringing new truth to the unenlightened masses, holding out a bold vision of what the future could be if only

- People would uncritically embrace the proposed changes and not cling to what they have now
- Government had the guts to make the tough decision and legislate the Report as a complete package.

The Commissioners in their Report are quick to castigate would- be opponents as defenders of the *status quo* – evidently a dirty word in their view. In the words of The Report: “It would be a real shame if concerns for preserving the *status quo*, and protecting the vested interests of existing institutions, were to frustrate the opportunity to create something new and dynamic for the province.” They are also quick to position themselves as champions of students, accessibility, efficiency, accountability and quality in New Brunswick Post-Secondary education, as if these have not been the same concerns of the universities they treat so shabbily in their Report and of any opponents.

Critics of the Report reject the de-coupling of campuses from UNB and U de M and turning them into vaguely defined, new and untried in New Brunswick “Polytechnics”, defined in Funk & Wagnalls Dictionary – but not in the Report - as “schools of applied science and the industrial arts”. While strongly supporting the recommendation for greater autonomy and expansion for community colleges, the Report’s critics are concerned that other recommendations may weaken the autonomy of universities and adversely affect their academic freedom, so important to the mission of universities everywhere. Critics in Saint John fear that the recommendations of the Commission may lead UNB Saint John back to the 1960s when it began life as a feeder campus to UNB Fredericton:

- Offering only first and second year courses in arts, science, applied science and business and
- Destroying the extensive and growing role that UNB Saint John has played in graduate programs and research since its beginning in 1964 through its association with UNB’s larger and older campus, a role that is vital to the future development of Saint John and New Brunswick

Many critics in Saint John argue vehemently that turning UNB Saint John into a polytechnic essentially means that it would lose the university it fought so hard to establish, which has been such a great success over the last 43 years, and that Saint John would once again become the only major city in the country without a university in its midst.

Once again there is the loud and persistent beating of the drums on the part of some for an independent university in Saint John. In this view, the Deutsch Commission should have recommended a separate university to begin in Saint John in 1964 instead of a branch campus of UNB. They heap abuse on UNB and its Board of Governors for the serious and chronic under funding of UNBSJ instead of where the fault really lies -on successive governments that have insisted on several occasions that government grants would only be made to UNB as a whole rather than separately, as the UNB Board had requested, to each of the 2 campuses of UNB. For its part, beginning in 1975, UNB has divided its total government grants between the campuses using the same formulas by which it receives the government grant. The UNB Board made a strong case to the government in 1987-88 to adjust the grant to take into account the accelerated growth of the Saint John Campus. I estimated that we needed \$3 million. After a joint effort by community leaders in Saint John, campus and university leaders to argue the case, the Saint John Campus eventually received something far less - only \$1 million from the government. The drumbeaters know that under funding has been the government’s fault not the UNB Board of Governors’ but choose to ignore this. The building of the Student Centre at the Saint John Campus came about because the Board asked the government to reallocate capital funds that had been committed for a Fredericton Campus building to the building of the Student Centre. Those who champion a separate university at any price ignore this too. Graduate work would not have been possible for the Saint John Campus without its UNB connection. Do the students want a separate campus? No. Do the faculty want a separate campus? No. What exactly is it that might be achieved that can’t be within the present UNB structure? The city of Los Angeles and its citizens have been

content to have its world class UCLA as a campus of the University of California. Why is it not good enough for UNBSJ to be a campus of the University of New Brunswick?

We currently have an academic powerhouse in UNBSJ that has been purposely and carefully built, offering undergraduate degrees and graduate degrees to the Ph.D. level. UNB accepted the mandate of the government in 1964 to build a full-fledged university in Saint John beginning with the first two years and growing beyond as circumstances warranted and finances allowed. The Board of Governors has stuck to the mandate it was given. Over the past 43 years the Board has overseen the building of a university here in Saint John as fine as the UNB campus in Fredericton. Sure there were ups and downs, struggles between the two campuses initially and a whole range of growing pains, but in terms of the funds made available by the government, the major decisions have been made at the Saint John Campus. UNB has built well in Saint John and don't let anyone tell you differently.

As for issue of local control that has been argued of late, let's be clear on that too. All accredited universities in Canada operate under provincial charters or legislation. If we are to have a real university in Saint John and not just the assurance of some kind of university, we, too, need to be a provincial institution rather than one controlled locally or we would be the laughing stock of the country. Community involvement? Of course. Close associations with business, industry, civic groups, other educational institutions and cultural organizations? Of course. Local control and governance? No.

The Commissioners' forecast of changing realities in the future and the attendant problems for society is not significantly different from that of their critics but the critics argue that the continuation of UNB Saint John represents a better way of meeting those challenges. They point, as examples, to UNB Saint John's development of articulated programs with the Moncton and Saint John Community Colleges and with the hospitals in those cities and with the St. Andrews Community College as well as to the variety of programs for international students that have been devised.

These examples would suggest that UNB Saint John – and the other universities for that matter – have been very responsive to the need for change, are dynamic and willing to work with other post-secondary institutions. In the absence of any analysis by the Commission of the current state of universities or how they in fact have changed tremendously over the past 4 decades, it is difficult to see why the recommendations with respect to universities are at all relevant. Even a cursory examination would show universities have often been the leaders of change within their own institutions and in many areas of society. The briefs of the universities to the Commission make clear they are not mindlessly clinging to the status quo but eager to embrace change and move ahead into the future whatever problems there may be. They have done this before and there appears to be no reason – certainly none advanced in the Report - that they could not continue to do so.

What is the future going to be like? What does the future require in terms of post-secondary education and training? The truthful answer is we don't know. Some in the

“business community” may argue that the existing institutions cannot meet the needs of the future and that only a Polytech, however ill defined, will be able to meet those undefined needs. But it should be remembered that the “business community” is not monolithic and that there are many and diverse views within the “business community.” Some business gurus in Canada and the United States have been arguing quite differently than the Report - that companies need to do far more within their own organizations to meet the changing nature of the workplace for white-collar and blue-collar workers and for the new and increasing breed of gray-collar workers. Malcolm Gladwell, for example, has argued in the *Globe and Mail* (October 1, 2007):

“We have to get better at helping people learn on the job. You’re going to have to create internal structures that will help people grow into positions; that’s really where the real opportunity s going to be. That’s what we’re going to have to do. That means being more patient with people, being willing to experiment with people, and being willing to nurture people. Those are three things we’re reluctant to do at the moment.” And later:

“I’m quite prepared for the possibility that the next revolution is not going to come from a machine; it’s going to come from creating a more thoughtful work force and giving people the opportunity to be thoughtful.”

Among many informed observers of business needs, Op-Ed columnist Bob Herbert, writing in the *New York Times* (October 6, 2007), looking ahead to the future at the situation in the United States, argues:

“One of the paramount challenges of the new era is the task of getting a legitimate four-year college degree into the hands of as many American young people as possible. A four-year degree has become a virtual prerequisite for a middle-class quality of life. The overall benefits to the country of such an explosive improvement in educational achievement are incalculable.”

In the Saint John and New Brunswick context of the debate over the post-secondary education report, these business gurus seem to be more aligned with the critics of the Report rather than with the authors. To whom should we listen? Who do we trust to take us into the future? - The universities with their leaders, and scientists and scholars who have taken us to where we are now, responding well despite inadequate funding to the challenges between the years 1964 and 2007? - Or to the voices that urge us to scrap the past and begin over again with no reliable roadmap?

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October 21, 2007