

Speaking Notes, Jan Mastromatteo

Finance Committee, October, 2009

Good evening and welcome to Prince George. I'm here representing the Faculty Association for the College of New Caledonia. The message I bring is very different from the last few speakers since my interest is in the working people of the region, particularly all of those who have lost their jobs or are trying to survive on marginal ones. By way of introduction, I was relieved to find out that Prince George was one of the communities that the Committee chose to visit in person. I know other communities were not so lucky and had to make their presentations by video conference. I appreciate that technology can be a real asset in gathering public input, but when it comes to budget making, I don't think I'm alone when I say that elected representatives need to make a special effort to meet citizens face to face. I realize, as well, that many of the government-side members might find those face to face encounters very contentious these days, given all the concerns raised about the imposition of the HST. Prince George is no exception in that respect. What many people find so frustrating about that policy was the utter lack of consultation. I would hope your final report would include some recommendations to the Minister of Finance to vastly improve his accountability and transparency when he contemplates such a significant policy change like HST.

That said, I want to use my time with you this evening to talk about the College of New Caledonia. CNC has close to 6,000 full and part-time students enrolled at our institution. We operate seven different campuses in the region. We pride ourselves on being a very engaged public institution with strong ties to the community. CNC is also a major employer in this region and I'm including in that number both public and private employers. We see ourselves as not only a provider of key education and training services in this area, but also an important piece within the economic fabric of the region.

One of the significant attractions of CNC is that it provides an important pathway for both direct entry students and adult learners, both of whom use our institution as their starting point for post-secondary education. For most of those students the reason for choosing our College is because it makes good economic sense: staying close to home is a lot cheaper than moving to a major centre like those within the Lower Mainland to start or complete their post-secondary education.

Our College also has a varied mix of students, both young and old. Our average age is 27. With that kind of mix, our institution needs the capacity to provide many different entry points into post-secondary education. Unfortunately, that capacity has been steadily eroded over the years as funding to our college has been tightly constrained. In 2008, for example, we lost—along with every other post-secondary institution in the province—2.6% of our provincial

operating grant. The cut was made unilaterally and with virtually no notice. Budget letters since then have not restored any of that cut.

What that means, at an institutional level, is that we are forced to do more with less. In his September 30th report to the College, our President noted the following changes as a result of the September 2009 Budget Update. He said the largest negative impact will be felt in the grant that the College receives to fund the on-going maintenance and repair of our facilities. According to the President that grant has been cut by \$461,993. As well, the provincial government has cut the funding for our Literacy Coordinators. They have also cut grants for our Aboriginal Special Project Fund which helped support a broad range of programs for First Nations communities in our region.

The cuts to the maintenance and repair funding are, at the very least, ironic. Over the past five years we have expanded our building infrastructure. We now have more square feet of buildings across the seven different campuses that we operate, but as of the September 1 Update we will have significantly fewer dollars to pay for the maintenance and repair of those public buildings. The pressure to cut maintenance will come on many fronts. I suspect that cleaning will be one of the first casualties in that crunch. When you consider that we are on the doorstep of a major flu season, one in which there is real concern about our capacity to deal with a major outbreak of H1N1, you have to ask yourself if these cuts to operating grants will turn out to be shortsighted and ill-considered.

The loss of programs in areas like literacy and the Aboriginal Special Projects Fund are just as troubling because they fly in the face of the government's—or should I say the Premier's—stated commitments on both these important initiatives. The Premier pledged to make BC the most literate, best educated jurisdiction in North America.

That's a laudable goal, but when you cut support for Literacy Coordinators, it sure looks like that goal didn't have much substance to it. You can make a similar argument about the funding for our Aboriginal Special Project Fund. The Premier pledged to create a "new relationship", but it now seems there is no funding to support that relationship.

These funding shortfalls send a confusing message to those who are suppose to be key targets for support. I would hope your final report makes recommendations that hold the government more accountable for its commitments and less likely to abandon those commitments without first consulting with citizens about the impact of those changes.

I'm mindful of time and there are other areas that I want the Committee to consider in terms of budget making for post-secondary institutions so I would like to summarize some of things that need to be included in the 2010 budget.

Affordability is an issue across the entire public post-secondary system. We have burdened students with more debt because we de-regulated tuition fees in 2001. That creates an enormous barrier to access at a time when our province needs to be training and educating more post-secondary students, not less. The skills shortage is real and post-secondary education is part of the solution, but that won't happen with the current funding commitments. Students need and deserve much more affordable tuitions and far more generous financial aid than is currently the case. You need to address that problem in the 2010 budget.

The province continues to send very confusing messages to post-secondary institutions by telling them, on the one hand, that block funding is there to give them the latitude to configure programs and courses in ways that make sense at a local level. Then the Ministry sends budget letters that detail specific programs that they will fund. This isn't a debate about which programs the Ministry is targeting with its funding letters. It's a comment on whether the provincial government is for or against block funding. If you want to give institutions autonomy over how programs are resourced, then give them the autonomy. If you don't want that to happen, then be very clear about that change in policy. It would be useful for this Committee's report to take a position on this issue and hopefully resolve the underling confusion.

Post-secondary institutions need to see a significant overhaul of the funding formula. Operating grants have not kept pace with inflation. Provincial funding has not kept pace with the demands that we know are there for programs. It has not closed the gap that exists in the funding of rural versus urban post-secondary institutions. Rather than add Band-Aids to the problem, the Committee's report should seriously consider a recommendation to bring all the stakeholders together to revise and renew the funding formula.

One last point and it has to do with how and where federal transfer dollars get spent. BC has signed a Labour Market and Labour Market Development Agreements with the federal government. It means that federal transfers are moving through the Ministry of Advanced Education. The money is designed to help provide education and training support, mostly for those who are unemployed or are making career transitions.

The public post-secondary system, including CNC in this region, is well positioned to deliver most, if not all, of those programs. British Columbians are looking to our system to meet their retraining needs as evidenced at CNC where enrolment is up 11.1% at its main Prince George campus and expected to be up 12-15% for the entire college this year. It would make good public policy for this Committee to make a recommendation in its report to the Legislature that strongly supports the use of public post-secondary institutions in the delivery of those programs.

Thanks again for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would be glad to take any questions that you might have.