

The Tories can't possibly satisfy everyone because they are boxed in by their election promises, which were reiterated in last week's Throne Speech — a balanced budget, lower taxes and significantly higher spending on health care.

That leaves little left over for everyone else, but the supplicants are lining up nonetheless.

Near the front of the line are the university presidents, who are meeting behind closed doors today with officials at Queen's Park to press their demands for another \$1 billion from the government to meet the costs of rising enrolment.

The presidents have been emboldened by a ringing declaration in last week's Throne Speech: "Every willing and qualified Ontario student will continue to be able to attend college or university."

This is not new. It repeats a commitment made by every premier back to John Robarts.

"But we were delighted to see those words in a Throne Speech," says Paul Davenport of the University of Western Ontario, the designated spokesperson on behalf of all the university presidents.

The fact it was there means the presidents have already been successful in gaining the government's attention to their problem: University enrolments swelled by a surprising 6.6 per cent this fall and are projected to continue growing dramatically over the next decade.

Students pay 35 per cent of their education costs

As students, on average, pay just 35 per cent of the cost of their education in tuition fees, every increase in enrolment puts further strain on university budgets. Another hike in tuition fees is not really an option as it could put university education well beyond the reach of all but the affluent — unless the government simultaneously enriches the student-loan program, which would also cost money.

Nor can the government simply tell the universities to operate more efficiently, as they have already been cut to the bone over the past decade.

In preliminary talks with the government, it has been suggested to the universities that they could use their space more intensively by scheduling classes on weekends or in the evenings to deal with the overflow of students.

The problem is that many students work in the evenings or on weekends to help pay their tuition, which has risen beyond what summer jobs alone could finance.

The Tories could, of course, do something dramatic, such as privatize a couple of universities, thereby augmenting the slices of the public funding pie available to the remainder. But as they begin their second mandate, the Tories seem to have lost their appetite for such major structural change.

So, expect the government to go at least part way toward meeting the universities' demands for more cash.

But the money will come with strings attached. As was also made clear in the Throne Speech, the Harris Tories — reflecting an anti-intellectual strain in their ranks — want universities to be more career-oriented in their approach to education.

"Your government believes that students deserve to graduate with the skills and knowledge they need to get jobs," it said in the speech. "It will start measuring and publishing job placement results for graduates of all college and university programs."

It would be a small step from measuring job placements to reducing grants to universities that fall below the average.

This, in turn, would put pressure on the universities to favour courses like computer science over degrees in philosophy.

In other words, what may seem like a victory for the universities — in the form of increased government grants — could turn out to be a defeat for the liberal arts.

Says Davenport, himself an economist: "We have to convince the government of the importance of the liberal arts."

It won't be an easy task.

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Good programs for child care needed quickly

BY TOM KENT

The new century will see some improvements in programs helpful to Canadian children. The federal government will continue its gradual increase in the child income benefit. Employment Insurance will finance longer parental leaves.

So far, so good. But the action is miles short of the rhetoric of the promised "children's agenda." The government, itself, has emphasized that gap by turning up the rhetoric. In his parliamentary address on Oct. 13, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien talked of a "commitment" to ensure "every Canadian child can have the best possible start in life." For this, he recognized, the early years are critical. What he did not recognize was the priority this establishes: Good child care must be available, nation-wide, for all kids, soon.

Large-scale financing of a new program could not be expected in this government's early years. But that need not have ruled out preparation. In fact, it did not rule out some increased federal subsidization of child care: for rich kids only.

In the 1997 budget, the tax deduction for child-care expenses was increased, for pre-school children, to \$7,000 a year. If parents can lay out that much, one at least is almost certainly paying the top rate of tax. The saving of tax is about \$3,000 a year. The \$7,000 worth of child care is bought by such a family for only \$4,000 of after-tax income. The rest is a subsidy from what would otherwise be public revenue.

It is a subsidy available only for children with well-to-do parents. It is not available to most families, whose incomes are too low for them

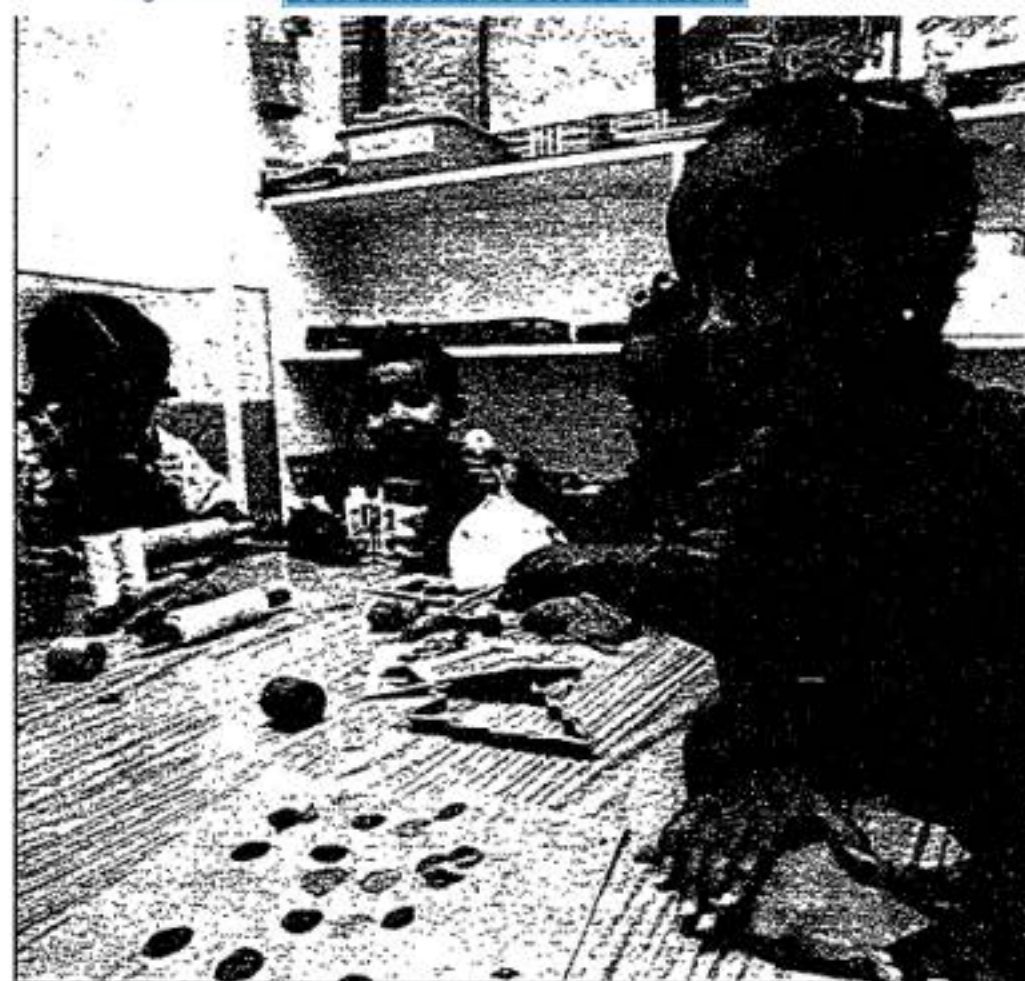
to lay out \$7,000 a year. Even if some manage it, little if any of their tax is likely to be at the top rate that means the \$3,000 reduction.

Caution about national child care is based, of course, on the constitutional powers of the provinces. The federal government cannot deliver or regulate child care, any more than it can deliver health care. But both are Canada-wide needs, for which part of the costs must be provided nationally. Without that we will not have comparable development opportunities for children across Canada, just as federal initiative was essential in the 1960s for the establishment of nation-wide medicare.

On Oct. 13, Chrétien proclaimed, "we must move as quickly as possible from talk to action," but what he went on to issue was a "challenge" to the provinces to come — within 14 months — to "an agreement on principles and objectives;" it would "strengthen community support for early childhood development," with a "five-year timetable" for "increased" federal and provincial funding.

It is true that any national project, whether railroad or child care service, takes time to build. It is true that child care must be carefully designed to serve, flexibly but fairly, varied family circumstances and wishes. It is also true that the provincial governments that must organize and administer child care have greatly varying resources.

All these are the reason not to delay, but to start vigorously. They are the reasons why little will happen soon unless the federal government provides the impetus of a firm financial commitment. Without that lead-



ROCK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

ACTION NOW: Government must end delay on child care.

ership, the Prime Minister's agenda is still talk, not action.

There is no obstacle, either of constitutional propriety or of political strategy, to such an initiative. The existing federal funding, for the care of rich kids, does not depend on provincial consent. It can be increased, it can be made universal and fair, without any elaborate negotiation. All that is needed is to replace the present tax allowance by a tax credit of the refundable kind. Such a credit can be structured to provide the same benefit whether the family's income makes its tax bill large or small or nothing.

My proposal would be a benefit to cover costs for child care up to a maximum of \$7,000 a year (the present allowance) for pre-school children. No doubt that is a greater commitment, even for implementation over several years, than the present government has the stomach for. But all its talk about investing in

people, about "every Canadian child" having "the best possible start in life," is empty talk unless it acts now to provide for all young children what it already does for the rich ones. That is, starting in 2000, it would make available, for all pre-school children, a child-care benefit of at least \$2,030 a year. That is the value of the rich-kid allowance that now arises solely through the federal tax system, without the provincial add-on.

If there is now truly some vision in Ottawa politics, evasion and delay about child care will end. As a start, the federal government will — at least and at once — help the early care of all Canadian children as much as it helps those lucky enough to be born to well-to-do parents.

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Food for thought in what we eat

Colin Vaughan



Food has become one of the hottest political issues worldwide.

French farmers are on a rampage over genetically modified foods versus fresh produce. In Britain, the Prince of Wales has weighed in with a caution about unknown long-term effects of genetically altered foods. Here, David Suzuki has issued a similar warning.

Mad cow disease and contaminated soft drinks have sparked scares across Europe. Reports of widespread E-coli outbreaks have become commonplace. The Canadian media is raising the alarm about how thorough this country's food testing and inspection systems are.

All the static is having an effect. An industry-based Task Force on Food Biotechnology wrote Ottawa's Health Minister Allan Rock last week, appealing for him to speak out against all "the negative publicity" and worrying that consumers "do not deserve to be frightened by half-truths and sensationalism."

Now, the City of Toronto is getting in on the act. On United Nations World Food Day, Oct. 15, a commission on food and hunger was launched at city hall, with five city councillors as members. The mandate is to look beyond hunger alone

to nutrition and food security. Public hearings are to be held across the city and you can be sure there'll be a lot said about engineered foods and the availability of fresh produce.

Debbie Field of FoodShare is one of those who pressed for setting up the commission. FoodShare is a community organization dealing with a food issues, ranging from community gardening to nutrition to breakfast programs. When it comes to hunger, Field wants city hall involved "to subsidize the infrastructure to put producer and consumer together," which, she believes, will prove much cheaper than just supplying food to those in need. For example, she sees the city promoting more farmer's markets and roof-top gardens.

The city hall commission will likely hear from Charlotte Jenei. Jenei is

a resident of Regent Park who coordinates the four community-garden sites there. Jenei says, "We have 40 on a waiting list. We could open three or four more gardens, even more." She adds that, although the land is available, the low-income community has trouble covering the modest costs of fencing and initial machine cultivation. She also feels it's unfair to ask the working poor, such as herself, to put in 15 to 20 hours a week without the pay a civil servant would expect.

Jenei puts another spin on genetically modified food. She reckons that, as public awareness rises, middle-income consumers will opt for fresh or organic produce. She believes that if the demand lags, what is fast becoming known as "Frankenfood" will "be sold at a lower price or, if unsold, will end up in food banks." That way, the poor are more likely to be exposed.

Another low-cost way for the city to promote food awareness is to set up more than the 12 popular, one-day farmer's markets now open at such locations as Nathan Phillips Square and Yorkdale. And have them open more often.

Field would also like to see city zoning ordinances require that resi-

dential neighbourhoods have easy access to suitable food outlets. She cites the example of housing at the west end of Harbourfront, where residents have to cross the railway tracks to shop at convenience stores or far-off Kensington market.

She also sees a need to bolster European-style food stores serving immigrant communities in shopping strips such as those on College Street, St. Clair Avenue and the Danforth.

All of which shows that concern over food supply is more complex than simply heading-off hunger and worries over genetic modification. Toronto is a long way from the decentralized European model where small, convenient, family-owned food stores and regular farmer's markets offer fresh produce to local populations every day of the week.

But, if concern over "Frankenfoods" and that city hall commission serve to raise public awareness, and one day results in more food stores within walking distance in my neighbourhood, count me in.

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