Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC

# *SURVEYING THE DESERT: EVALUATING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION POLICY IN ELECTION PLATFORMS*

*An election is no time to discuss serious issues.*

*Kim Campbell*

**Introduction**

The three parties have finally released their costed platforms with the Conservatives releasing their platform over the weekend, less than a week before voting starts. Given the crisis our sector is facing, it would be an understatement to say we are disappointed in the lack of focus on post-secondary education in this election. The Conservatives barley mention our sector and, on brand, the NDP continue the pattern of ignoring the sector as they have in the past nine years. Only the Green Party seems have to put any thought or focus into solutions for the sector. Less clear is how sustainable and expensive some of those solutions are. Indeed, it is safe to say that all three parties lean into Kim Campbell's advice and focus far more on rhetoric and slogans than innovative solutions to vexing social and economic challenges. In what follows we will provide a high-level analysis of each platform and detailed comments on any commitments related to post-secondary education.

**Conservative Platform**

Not surprisingly, the Conservative platform focuses on fiscal prudence and economic growth. However, the platform is long on rhetoric and short on details about how this growth would unfold. The Conservatives growth projections for the first three years of the mandate are 2.5% for 2027, 2.8% for 2028, and 3.2% for 2029. Those projections are considerably higher than most private sector projections and represents $2.62B in additional revenue from just the *difference* between their projections and the NDP's growth forecasts. The NDP growth forecasts are more in line with private sector projections for the next three years.

The Conservatives also promise extensive savings via a spending review, along with a hiring freeze and substantial savings via attrition. They are also promising a review of department spending that the Conservatives are promising will generate $1.8B in savings with a further $2B saved via the hiring freeze and gradual attrition. The platform also claims that all of the departmental savings will come from emptying so called 'slush funds' with no cuts to frontline

services. There no evidence provided to support that assertion.

The Conservatives commitment on post-secondary education could be described, generously, as thin. There are a few commitments to connect high school students to training opportunities prior to graduation. There is also a commitment to bring back shop classes in new high schools. It is less than clear why those commitments are under the heading of Post-Secondary Education. Also under this banner is a commitment to expand dual-credit programs, apprenticeships, and paid work experience students.

There is also the following commitment: *We will make it easier for schools to hire qualified Red Seal tradespeople, musicians, athletes and other experts.* It is, again, unclear if this is a reference to hiring at the high school or post-secondary education level.

Whatever the merits or lack thereof of these proposals, they will clearly do nothing to address the funding crisis and mass layoffs across the sector. They also provide no vision for the role of post-secondary institutions in easing the labour disruption in the province and the need for retraining in the wake of Trump's tariffs and job losses in the resource economy.

In addition, the optimistic growth projections casts doubt on any assurance the Conservatives have made to meet their deficit targets without cutting frontline services. UBC economist Werner Antweiler nicely sums up this skepticism about both the NDP and the Conservative platforms as follows:

*Both parties get a failing grade from me for fiscal stewardship. Those plans are fiscally unsound because they do not take fully into account that you need either heroic assumptions about economic growth to shrink the deficit, or you actually have to go and either raise revenue or cut expenditures.*

**NDP Platform**

The NDP platform is a mix of recent accomplishments along with commitments for the next four (?/!) years. However, the term post-secondary education does not appear anywhere in the NDP's platform and the term education only appears twice, once to warn of cuts the Conservatives would make if elected.

While there are some laudable commitments and accomplishments in the platform befitting a social democratic government, the complete silence on post-secondary education is demoralizing. That said, this government has stood silent in the last three years as our sector has been decimated by layoffs and programs closures as a result of the sudden and dramatic cut to international student study permits. The NDP claim that this needless election was precipitated by the economic upheaval caused by the Trump tariffs. However, the NDP plan is completely silent on how those displaced by the tariffs, there is also no plan for where those required to build, plan, and engineer major Canadian projects are going to be educated.

**Green Party Platform**

The Green party platform is, by far, the most ambitious of the three major parties on post-secondary education. The Green Party commitments on post-secondary policy are as follows:

- A $40 million grant to enhance funding for non-repayable grants that would see the grant grow from $4000 to $8000.

- Expand protections for graduate student workers to unionize under the BC Labour Relations Code.

- A 4-year tuition freeze

- Bring University and College residences under the Residency Tenant Act

- Dedicated funding for the expansion $10 a day daycare on campus.

- Funding for clean energy research investment.

The increase in non -repayable needs-based student financial assistance is a welcome policy innovation. As is the recognition of the crisis in our sector signaled by the need to review the funding formula. And while there are a number of innovative and revenue neutral proposals in this platform, there is a lack of detail on how some of the more expensive promises would be funded. For example, FPSE supports accessible low-cost tuition for BC students, but an unfunded tuition freeze will merely exacerbate the existing funding crisis. As worrisome, there is no plan to address the current funding shortfall and build a funding formula that will ensure BC's colleges and universities are sustainable in the years ahead. Though as noted there is a commitment for a review of the current funding model:

*Replace BC's outdated post-secondary funding model through a public, system-wide review with new provincial funding on the table. This will include reviewing the roles and mandates of all 25 public institutions, how funding is distributed, regional access, research and teaching responsibilities, trades and technical education, transfers between institutions, and the needs of communities around the province.*

That is a fatally vague promise with no actual funding commitment attached to it. It is also passing strange that none of the three parties say what they will do with the still pending Avison Review. Though in damning with faint praise, the Grenn Party of BC's platform is far more substantial than any of the commitments made by the Conservatives or the NDP.

**Conclusion**

As should be apparent by now the options of those looking for innovation and hope from any of the main party platforms are grim. With the exception of the Green Party, all of these platforms are stuck in the 1970's, heavily betting on resource extraction to drive economic growth and largely leaving the post-secondary education sector to flounder and contract. Regardless of who wins this election our job is clear, work on the ground and in our communities to ensure that politicians of all stripes come to regard post-secondary education as a vital part of the social, economic, and cultural fabric of this province. The sad truth, as we near the end of this election campaign, is that much more work remains to be done in making post-secondary policy an election issue.