



JACKSON HINTON

**TELL ME MORE** Dave Taylor, provincial Liberal Advanced Education Critic, was surprised to learn of the largely unpublicized online postsecondary review, which the federal government classifies as part of a public consultation.

# Federal gov't keeps quiet on public postsecondary review

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Senior News Editor

Despite Stephen Harper's criticism of the Liberal reign and their propensity for secrecy, his government is now facing its own criticism for their lack of publicity on a so-called public campaign. Last week, members of Alberta's postsecondary sector were surprised to learn they hadn't been informed of a Canada-wide online consultation to evaluate the scope of the federal government's role in postsecondary education.

After members of the U of A Students' Union read about it for the first time on the weblog of *Macleans*' magazine political columnist Paul Wells, they sent out a public service announcement on 17 August, encouraging Albertans to participate in the review.

Wells, who was informed of the review by an undisclosed source working in the university sector, questioned the structure of the review and the effectiveness of an unpublicized consultation.

"It's insane to have a secret public consultation. It's holding the people who take higher education closest to heart in contempt and it flies in the face of Stephen Harper's years of criticism of Liberal secrecy," Wells said.

SU President Samantha Power echoed these statements, and questioned the role of the Council of the Federation, which is supposed to increase communication between Canada's premiers.

"It's also extremely odd, because the Council of the Federation was sort of created for this purpose: to evaluate where postsecondary sat in the federal government's priorities," Power said.

Postsecondary education is under provincial jurisdiction, however, at the federal level, it currently falls primarily under the responsibility of the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development (HRSDC) Diane Finley.

Wells explained that the current online consultation sits under the federal government's broader discussion of how to rectify the fiscal imbalance between Ottawa and the rest of the provinces.

"But, in a budget where [the fed-

eral government] announced their consultation on fiscal imbalance they didn't announce the consultation on postsecondary education," Wells noted. "I'm curious how fast word would have gotten out, down to the grassroots and down to the universities' associations and provincial governments, if I hadn't posted it on my blog."

However, Rahim Jaffer, Conservative MP for Edmonton-Strathcona, said that the review, which was initiated by the department of the HRSDC minister, was intended to ensure consultation reached all audiences.

**"God, it's pretty hard to have a consultation if you don't tell anybody that you're consulting them."**

**DAVE TAYLOR,  
LIBERAL ADVANCED  
EDUCATION CRITIC**

"The thinking was that they were wanting to sort of focus in on having a wide ranging process of asking average Canadians for the overall objectives of education," Jaffer said. "Our government believes it's not a good attitude to have a one size fits all policy, but to really hear from all Canadians as to how we can continue to improve the quality of education. And that was the thrust of the consultation process."

But, it appears as though student representatives weren't the only ones uninformed of the consultation, which began on August 15 and will run until 8 September.

"I'm sure that people in my department probably are intimately involved with it, but I hadn't been made aware of it yet," Alberta Minister of Advanced Education Denis Herard said on 28 August.

However, Herard remained optimistic that the review signifies an increased interest by the federal government in reaching an agreement with the provinces on funding responsibilities.

"I'm glad to hear that they are

starting to communicate—even if it's in this particular way—to gain some insight in postsecondary, because it obviously means that somebody got their attention."

However, the Advanced Education Critic for the Alberta Liberals, Dave Taylor, was less convinced the consultation indicated productive steps by the federal government.

"God, it's pretty hard to have a consultation if you don't tell anybody that you're consulting them," Taylor said.

"If the Minister hasn't heard about it, and the Official Opposition Critic hasn't heard about it at the provincial level when this is supposed to be our jobs, I would say that there's a damn good possibility that something in the neighborhood of 97–99 per cent of all the students in postsecondary institutions across this province haven't heard of it."

Nor had the U of A Administration been notified, though they had found out about the review after it had been posted on the federal website through an online search.

"We have people that scan everything that comes out of Ottawa just in case we've missed something," Provost and Vice-President (Academic) Carl Amrhein explained.

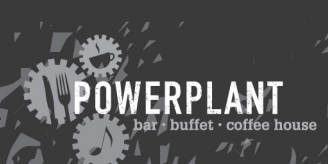
"It's not the best way because doing things—this time of summer is always problematic because lots of people are gone. [But] we're not particularly worried about it, because I don't think it's going to be the only opportunity [for consultation]," Amrhein added.

And, in respond to criticism stating that little to no effort had been put into informing Canadians of the review, Jaffer assured that the online consultation was indeed only an initially step towards defining a comprehensive federal policy on postsecondary education.

"The more specific consultation, as it pertains to postsecondary, will be done as we plan our next budget, and I believe the Minister is planning to really interact with student leaders as well as the administration of various postsecondary institutions," Jaffer assured.

All Canadians are eligible to participate in the online consultation at [www3.hrsdc.gc.ca](http://www3.hrsdc.gc.ca).

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