

Letter to the editor  
Georgia Straight  
August 25, 2005

Re: Probing behind the propaganda blitz, August 18th

Charlie Smith is on-point in describing how post-secondary education becomes a political football in BC. To play the game, apparently it is vital to spend millions on TV ad time instead of using that money to create real, affordable access for students. What a joke! As he says, it will be interesting to see if the ball gets dropped again as we get closer to the other games in 2010, the ones with the higher viewer ratings.

A quote in the article praises Campbell for his decision to add 25,000 "seats" over 5 or 6 years as if it was the sign of a deep-thinking social policy genius. What a joke!

These "seats" are delivered through increases in funding over so many years that it's hard to know if the amounts will be that significant once inflation is factored in, especially since Colleges are increasingly on the hook themselves for a larger share of any construction or needed capital maintenance.

Just as there's gamesmanship around the whole sector, there's gamesmanship around the term "seats." The average citizen sitting in their easy chair would think of a nice extra chair in a classroom with one of those writing thingies attached. If it's a full-time "seat," then it's available for all the classes an imaginary full-time student needs to attend and of course since they're praising themselves, the government is paying for the desk and if there is a new classroom full of them, for an added instructor.

Not so anymore. The government just tells colleges to produce more "seats," to add them to their annual quota. Then, it doesn't give them all the money to pay for the instructor and the other costs that go to making that desk useful. How do colleges get it? By making students pay more. At Vancouver Community College, we estimate that during the Liberal Era, students have contributed three-quarters of any inflation-adjusted increase in funding.

It gets worse; many potential students can't afford to pay the higher full-time fees so they stay away, or come part-time. But then the "seats" aren't filled and someone might look bad, ok so we'll pad the numbers a bit by counting every time a student contacts a chair in a learning or tutoring centre as part of a "seat." Worthy activities to be sure but hardly what a political spin master would want you to think of as a "seat." Even worse is that despite all these games, student quotas are not being met at many colleges.

That does not bode well for our future.

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