

Party Platform Analysis Election 2017



Executive Summary

CUFA BC is the provincial voice of over 5,500 faculty members and academic librarians at the province's five research universities: the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, the University of Victoria, the University of Northern British Columbia, and Royal Roads University.

We are a non-partisan organization and this evaluation of each of the party platforms is done through the lens of our core policy priorities as identified by our Council:

- Stable and predictable core funding
- Legislative support for free and fair collective bargaining
- Legislative reform to ensure collegial governance
- Support for basic research
- The creation of a merit-based graduate scholarship program
- Measures to ensure equitable access to post-secondary education for marginalized groups

The primary conclusions of our analysis are as follows:

- None of the three parties prioritize post-secondary education.
- The Liberal track record on bargaining and funding is not encouraging and there is nothing forward-looking in the platform for advanced education.
- The Green Party is strong on university governance and has the only significant research commitment in their platform. Less promising is their lack of commitment to collective bargaining and their choice to join the Liberals in attacking unions.
- The NDP platform is weak on issues of core funding and collegial governance. It is very strong on student aid, including adopting CUFA BC's proposal for a graduate scholarship program. The party demonstrates a strong commitment and track record on supporting and protecting collective bargaining. Overall, the NDP has the strongest of three uninspiring platforms on post-secondary education.

Liberal Party of British Columbia

The Liberals have been in power since 2001 and have both the burden of governing and the advantage of an actual record to be judged on. That said, we will limit our commentary primarily to the performance of the government in the most recent mandate and campaign proposals set out in the 2017 platform.

Core Funding

The record of the past four years is best summed as neglect and disinterest. The record on core funding is a mixed one at best. Shortly after being re-elected in 2014 the Liberals brought in an across the board cut of 2% for BC's research universities. The dollar value of the cut was \$51 million. Though there has been some modest reinvestment, funding has not kept pace with inflation or enrolment growth, and there is no acknowledgment of the unique cost challenges research universities face. For example, library holdings and journal subscriptions at all of our institutions are under immense pressure because of the recent and precipitous drop in the Canadian dollar. The end result is that, in real terms, post-secondary has suffered more than any other core ministry. Adjusted for inflation, funding for research universities in the most recent four-year mandate is down, conservatively, by 10%. It should be noted that this decline in funding has taken place during a period of robust growth and burgeoning surpluses, leaving the unsettling question of how BC's research universities would fare during less prosperous periods.

In the last budget before the writ dropped, the Liberals promised an additional \$46 million to increase graduates in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) disciplines. There were no details attached to how that funding would be distributed beyond a commitment to increase STEM students by 1,000 by 2020, and then once that cohort is in its fourth-year, increase students by a further 1,000. This commitment, set out in the party's campaign proposal, is somewhat at odds with the budget announcement that represented the money flowing over a three-year period as opposed to what looks like five years in the platform. The nature of the funding is also concerning in that the government is directing funding into certain niche programs it deems worthy of enhanced funding. Governments of all stripes are notoriously poor at predicting both long term labour market trends and the actual needs of research universities. While the infusion of core funding is welcome after the cut of 2014, the government should not be in the business of micromanaging the research and teaching priorities of universities.

Less than a week before election day the Liberals announced a commitment to increase UBC Medical School graduates from 288 to 400 by 2025, an increase of 40%. This commitment is not contained in the Liberal platform and is not costed. No further details of the plan were available at the time of the release of this document.

The only other funding commitment of note in the Liberal platform is \$10 million to expand the open textbook program. Though a good idea in theory the program is underutilized and a variety of copyright issues make it difficult to imagine how the program can be meaningfully expanded.

Despite the announcement in the latest budget the government has been singularly unambitious in the realm of post-secondary education policy. Though the Liberal government made noises about tying funding to the job market there were no tangible measures in that direction and linking university funding to an ever shifting labour market rarely, if ever, has the desired effect. Given that the much touted growth from LNG has yet to materialize (and may never) it is vital to develop a diversified

economy with a citizenry trained in critical thinking and the capacity to adapt to several different jobs over the course of a career. Any funding model tied to short term labour market trends would have the opposite effect.

One final note on the Liberals' platform is that they propose loosening restrictions for building on-campus, student housing. Though there is little detail attached to this proposal it is presumed that it lifts the restriction on borrowing to build housing. While not a cost item per se it would reduce the pressure on operating funds to finance on-campus housing capital projects.

Collective Bargaining

The Liberals record on free and fair collective bargaining is a dismal one. They have expanded the pernicious role played by the Public Sector Employers Council (PSEC) in collective bargaining in British Columbia. The bargaining mandate for the province is set centrally and there is very little room for creative, collaborative bargaining under the PSEC model. Indeed it is clear that PSEC is undermining labour relations in the province and was largely to blame for a two-week strike at UNBC in 2015.

The provincial government has used PSEC and other means to meddle in collective bargaining to undermine and attack unions and the very principle of free and fair collective bargaining. The recent stunning Supreme Court Judgement against the government reinstates Madame Justice Susan Griffith's decision to restore funding the Liberal government cut when it simply stripped out a collectively bargained clause on class size and composition. Despite a number of recent Supreme Court decisions enshrining the right to strike and the right to free and fair collective bargaining, the Liberals have adopted an adversarial, disrespectful, and ultimately self-defeating approach to unions and collective bargaining in British Columbia.

Collegial Governance

The current system of university governance in British Columbia allows the government of the day to appoint a voting majority to university Boards of Governors. This system ensures a process of political patronage and micromanaging of BC's research universities. According to an analysis undertaken by *The Georgia Straight*, since 2005 nine of the eleven Liberal appointees to the UBC Board have contributed a combined \$387,284 to the party¹. This politicized process has had predictable results. At UBC the unseemly handling of Arvind Gupta's ouster as UBC president was driven by Liberal appointees who acted in secret from the rest of the Board. Despite appointing these loyal supporters, the Liberal government stood by while UBC's international reputation was tarnished by the behaviour of the Board. It must be noted that the Minister of Advanced Education, Andrew Wilkinson, was utterly silent throughout this crisis and refused to meet with faculty. Indeed, the appointment of Wilkinson as Minister signalled the Liberal government's lack of interest in post-secondary education policy given how weak and ineffectual Wilkinson was as Minister.

At UNBC the voting majority of liberal appointees was crucial in the 7-6 vote to appoint James Moore as Chancellor. Moore was a bizarre choice for Chancellor given his highly partisan record as the Conservative Minister of Industry who presided over cuts to the granting councils and actively worked to silence the voice of government scientists. The role of Chancellor is largely ceremonial and the individual should be a respected figure who unites the community in the name of the institution. By this

¹ <http://www.straight.com/news/517301/dermod-travis-ubc-board-governors-sheds-light-provincial-control-local-bodies>



measure, Moore was a very poor choice and, again, the government stood idly by while its appointees mismanaged and undermined confidence in governance at BC's research universities.

Student Financial Aid

Student debt has increased substantially under the BC Liberals, largely because of the ill-conceived decision to eliminate the needs-based grants program in 2003. BC remains alone in Canada without a comprehensive needs-based grants program, and students from under-represented groups are forced to rely solely on loans to finance their education. BC is increasingly an outlier in this area as both Ontario and New Brunswick have instituted needs-based grants to ensure that low income families pay no tuition fees.

BC students currently pay the highest rate of interest on student loans, Prime plus 2.5%. On the eve of the election the Liberals announced that if re-elected they will drop the rate by 2.5%.

Though not directly connected to BC's research universities, it is also worth noting the Liberals' profoundly regressive decision to eliminate free tuition for Adult Basic Education programs and institute fees of \$1,600 per semester. Students in ABE programs in British Columbia are overwhelmingly from poor and marginalized populations and the move to add fees creates a barrier for those least able to afford it.

Green Party of British Columbia

The Green Party of British Columbia, led by University of Victoria faculty member Andrew Weaver, is running candidates in almost all ridings in the province, and has released a full platform. That said, the platform is lacking in detail and, unlike the Liberals and the NDP, there is no line by line costing of their commitments.

Core Funding

The Green Party platform is silent on core funding. Though there is certainly no reference to cutting current budgets, there is no commitment to enhance funding or backfill the Liberal cuts.

There is one important reference to academic research in the Green Party platform which commits to:

Invest \$120 million over four years for partnerships with industry, academic institutions and other levels of government to support research, development and commercialization of climate friendly technologies and implement innovative ways to achieve desired environmental outcomes.

While this is a substantial commitment, it is limited to commercializable research in the area of climate technology. In addition, it seems clear that this research would require an industry partner which would virtually rule out any place for basic research.

Student Financial Aid

The Green Party has two core proposals on student aid: the first is to restore the needs-based grants program cut by the Liberals and the second is a tax “refund” of up to \$2,000 per year for five years to entice BC graduates to stay in province.

The proposal to restore a system of needs based grants is a welcome one, however the platform is vague on both cost and architecture of the program. A grants program is, by definition, expensive and it is concerning that this proposal is not fully costed. While a certain level of generality is to be expected in a party platform, the lack of costing and detail throughout the Green Party platform is disconcerting. For example, it is not clear if the tax policy would be a non-refundable tax credit or a simple tax rebate of \$2,000 -- that matters because the cost difference between the two options is substantial. Up front grants programs are also notoriously expensive and can be complex to administer. Under costing for both promises is the tag line: “\$10 million over three years”. That costing model is simply not credible for a province the size of British Columbia. As noted, both the Liberals and NDP cost all of their proposals.

In addition, the proposals for a tax credit to entice graduates to remain in BC seems like a solution to a problem that it is not clear exists. No data is supplied to substantiate out migration as an issue and indeed BC is still experiencing significant population influx from other provinces. Data is scarce on the exact credentials of those moving to BC, but there is no evidence to support the idea that BC is in the midst of a ‘brain drain’ that would support such a tax credit. One final note on funding in the Green Party platform: they have committed verbally during the campaign to restore the tuition-free status of Adult Basic Education but this not in their platform and is not costed.



Collegial Governance

While there is no reference to collegial governance in the platform, the Green Party was a vocal critic of the government on the issue of collegial governance in the last mandate -- indeed they were a more effective opposition voice on the issue than the NDP. Green Party leader Andrew Weaver tabled a private members' bill that would have curtailed the politicized process of appointing Board of Governor representatives and bolstered collegial governance at the teaching intensive universities in BC.

Collective Bargaining

Though there is no reference to collective bargaining or PSEC in the platform, recent comments by Green Party Leader Andrew Weaver about the BCTF and unions generally are concerning. More concerning, leader Andrew Weaver has taken to Twitter and elsewhere to attack several teachers and BCTF members who were concerned about his comments regarding the education funding mandated by the recent Supreme Court judgement. The fundamental basis for the award is the finding that the BC Liberals acted in bad faith in the bargaining process in stripping away commitment on class size and composition. Given the very clear court decision that the BCTF were victims of bad faith bargaining and a government hell bent to goad them into a strike, it is passing strange to accuse the BCTF of being adversarial. The Supreme Court of Canada found them to be the aggrieved party in the Liberal government's taxpayer funded attack on teachers, unions, and the very principle of collective bargaining.

New Democratic Party of British Columbia

The NDP platform is a costed and detailed blueprint for what NDP government policy on post-secondary education would look like. However, like both the Liberals and the Green Party, advanced education does not appear to be a top priority. In addition, where the NDP make specific commitments they tend to focus on student aid and access.

Core Funding

The NDP has agreed to keep the Liberal promise of more funding for STEM graduates and emulates the Liberal language of supporting the ‘tech sector’. The NDP actually commits to \$100 million in additional funding as opposed to the \$46 million committed by the Liberals in the February 2017 budget. In the budget the Liberals allocate \$96 million for the tech sector but a careful reading of the budget suggests that only \$46 million of that is actually intended to flow to colleges and universities, with the rest going to industry in the form of training subsidies. It is unclear if the NDP is simply lifting the amount from the most recent Liberal budget and rounding up, or if they intend to earmark the entire \$100 million to colleges and universities.

In addition, the NDP has committed to restore the cuts to Adult Basic Education (ABE) and reinstate the policy of free tuition for ABE programs. On the issue of tuition fees, the platform commits to maintain the current policy of allowing fees to increase by a maximum of 2%. Beyond that commitment there is no reference in the platform to core funding.

The NDP also makes the same pledge as the Liberals to ease borrowing rules to allow colleges and universities to borrow to build on-campus housing. Presumably this means allowing institutions to borrow to fund student housing instead of having to allocate funding for capital projects from operating budgets.

The one reference to research in the NDP platform is a doubling, to \$2 million, of funding for the Therapeutics Initiative (TI) at UBC. The TI works to independently evaluate the effectiveness and affordability of prescription drugs and has not made friends in the pharmaceutical industry. The Liberal government cut funding for TI shortly after the last election and then reversed that decision after an outcry from physicians, public research activists, and patients’ advocates.

Collegial Governance

Despite a relentless focus on the dubious fundraising practices of the BC Liberals, the NDP have made no commitment to change the highly politicized process for appointing representatives to Boards of Governors at BC’s research universities. In addition, they were curiously silent during the governance imbroglios at both UBC and UNBC.



Collective Bargaining

The NDP has, by far, the strongest commitment and track record on free and fair collective bargaining. While in opposition, the NDP has been consistent in its support for the BCTF's fight against the Liberal government's repeated attacks on collective bargaining. While it is true PSEC was an NDP creation, the NDP has been consistent in saying that if elected public sector bargaining will be more fair after a tilted playing field for employers in the last 16 years in British Columbia. Though there are few specifics in the platform the NDP has committed to making unionizing more straightforward and to ensure that the Employment Code functions in the interest of all British Columbians.

Student Financial Aid/Access

Of the three parties, the NDP devotes the most attention and funding to student access and financial aid issues. The NDP is the only party to endorse CUFA BC's call for a provincial program of merit-based scholarship programs. The platform calls for \$50 million to create a graduate scholarship program to attract and retain graduate students in BC.

The NDP's boldest student aid proposal is to eliminate interest on student loans all together. While not as effective as grants, this proposal would have the effect of reducing the premium paid by those forced to borrow for their education. The NDP also propose a modest \$1,000 "completion grant" that would directly reduce a student's debt. However, unlike previous platforms there is no commitment to restore the needs-based grants program cut by the Liberals.

Conclusion

As should now be clear, none of the three parties have made post-secondary education a centrepiece of their platforms. Though post-secondary education is rarely a defining election issue it is fair to say that relative to the recent federal election and the most recent elections in Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario the policy proposals from all three BC parties are disturbingly thin.

The one area in which there is a clear distinction between the parties is the NDP's commitment to free and fair collective bargaining. It is discouraging that despite a series of stinging setbacks in the Supreme Court, the Liberal government simply cannot bring itself to respect the democratic foundations of collective bargaining. Indeed, it is fair to say that the only positive contribution of successive Liberal governments to collective bargaining is to have undertaken actions so egregious that the Supreme Court has twice had to step in and clarify the Charter protection of free and fair collective bargaining. The Green Party has used unions as a foil to attack the NDP and they have not been particularly critical of the Liberal record on collective bargaining. Simply put, there is little in the Green Party platform to suggest that they would change the temperature and tone of collective bargaining in BC. In the end, then, none of the three parties inspire with their policy prescriptions and only the NDP hold out any promise for a more balanced collective bargaining environment.

On funding for higher education, BC risks becoming a laggard at a time when the individual and social returns on post-secondary education have never been more clear. Those with a university degree earn on average \$21,000 more than those with only a high school credential, and those with graduate degrees earn on average \$17,000 per year than those with a BA. The tax implications of this differential are dramatic--on average, those with a high school credential or less contribute \$4,925 annually to the tax base and those with an undergraduate degree contribute \$11,803. We outline these benefits and many others in detail in our submission to the Select Standing Committee on Finance that builds the case that funding for post-secondary education is an investment and not a burden².

Despite the obvious returns on investing in post-secondary education, university support from the province has not matched inflationary costs, either in the long run or in the last 3 - 4 years. In addition, the challenge of aging research infrastructure and deferred maintenance at BC's research universities has largely been ignored. Despite these challenges, the post-secondary education sector has assumed the burden of budget cutting more than other sectors, having received an absolute cut in funding at the same time as provincial revenues have increased -- between 2008 and 2016 BC government revenue grew by close to 20%. To our knowledge, the Ministry of Advanced Education is the only ministry to have suffered an absolute dollar reduction in the last four years.

The defining lack of ambition is concerning given the governance crises and funding cuts faced by BC's research universities in the past four years. The politicized process of governance in BC has wreaked havoc on our system of post-secondary education and, as is now painfully obvious, politics is not a pathway to excellence in university governance. None of the three parties lay out a solution to the structural governance challenges faced by BC's research universities. None of the three parties propose any form of provincial support for basic research and none have a comprehensive solution to ensure sustainable core funding.

² http://www.cufa.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CUFA-Finance_Committee_Brief-2016.pdf

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