



Kennedy, E. (2000). Access 2000: An interview with Joel Harden and Steven Kammerer. *Workplace*, 5, 41-43.

ELLIE KENNEDY

ACCESS 2000:

An Interview with Joel Harden and Steven Kammerer

ACCESS 2000, affectionately known as "A2K," is the Canadian Federation of Students' year-long nationwide campaign for a universally accessible, high quality system of higher education in Canada. A2K is about protesting federal government cutbacks to post-secondary education and calling for a reinvestment of \$3.7 billion, as well as tuition freezes and a system of grants rather than loans. The campaign loudly announced its presence with a pan-Canadian Day of Action on Feb 2nd, designed to give a clear message to the federal government a few short weeks before this year's budget.

Joel Harden is the Ontario chair of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), and provincial coordinator for Access 2000, and Steven Kammerer is VP External to Queen's University's Society for Graduate and Professional Students, and organizer of Queen's Day of Action march and rally. Both kindly agreed to be interviewed for Workplace. The following interview took place immediately after the release of the federal budget on February 28th, 2000, which announced a paltry Can\$2.5 billion to be shared between health care and education over the next four years.

Joel, what's your reaction to this budget?

JH: An August 1999 poll showed that 81% of Canadians believe the government's financial priorities should lie with health care and education, while only 19% preferred tax cuts. In this budget, 80% went on tax cuts and less than 20% on social programs. This is an exact flip-flop of the wishes of Canadians. The government is either wilfully ignoring or cheating the public.

How did A2K get started?

JH: Access 2000 was launched in 1998 in response to the federal government's so-called education budget, which centrepieced education, research, and youth employment. Although students achieved gains in some areas, the measures put forward were not targeted at the two places facing the greatest crises: the broad base of low income students and the bottom line of universities themselves. The "education budget" measures will do little to reduce student debt, and do not help reduce tuition fees or provide adequate core funding to higher education. Also, several 1998 budget measures made fundamental changes to the Canada Student Loans Program and the Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act that will prevent poor and working class students from receiving their education.

That's when the CFS decided we're not going to let them get away with it.

What does the A2K campaign involve?

JH: Our approach is multi-pronged: as well as the Day of Action, we're lobbying governments, mobilizing communities and continuing to educate the public. We've got to get alternative research and alternative numbers out there. We've gained overwhelming support from the public: pensioners, trade unionists, even university administrations. Some university presidents have endorsed the campaign, too.

Intervention is the key. A2K is the CFS' intervention into the surplus debate. The business lobby can intervene in government policy at any time through special interest groups, the National Post etc. We don't have those avenues of intervention, but our strength lies in numbers. This way we can be very effective. The government certainly knew what we were saying on the Day of Action

What were some of the highlights of the Day of Action?

JH: Queen's was amazing: Not only did they get faculty and administration onside, but they captivated the local media. The naysayers were proved wrong: Queen's students do support collective action. 1500 students turned out, despite other commitments and the freezing cold - that's more than usually vote in student elections! Also, the turnout at places like Toronto (5000) and Halifax (3000) was really encouraging.

Steven, what went on at Queen's?

SK: We called it the "Queen's Campaign for Higher Education," because it was a call for higher funding, higher access, higher quality, and higher levels of education. At 12 noon, members of the Queen's and Kingston communities gathered and marched across campus. Then there were events and speakers at an outdoor stage we had set up.

Were you pleased with the turnout?

SK: Well, we shook the foundations of a few buildings as we passed through them on our march. 1500 people turned out. The Queen's Faculty Association helped by endorsing a plan to encourage professors and deans to make other arrangements for their classes that day. Queen's students have yet again disproved their reputation for apathy. They do care about retaining diversity, both among the student population and in the range of programs offered. Increasing tuition links it to market forces, which in turn negatively offers the range of what you can study at a university.

Many people got up to speak, professors and students - there's a high level of awareness linking the education sector to the objective of reinvesting in the future. This was only the latest in a string of successful rallies in recent years. It was organized by a core group of undergrads, grad students, faculty and staff. Even the administration voiced support for us. The whole Queen's community came together.

So what's next?

JH: The A2K campaign is designed to last the whole of the year 2000. We didn't blink when the government did nothing for us in 1999, we sure as hell aren't going to stop now. Next we'll take the fight to the international level. There are enormous pressures on governments at the international level from undemocratic sources such as large corporations, who are telling governments how to set social policy. We must look these groups in the eye and not allow ourselves to be intimidated, not allow them to legislate our lives and diminish our expectations. Seattle was a fine example of this sort of action.

SK: Queen's linked Access 2000 to globalization issues, kicking off the weekend beforehand with anti-

sweatshop events and a rally addressed by Maude Barlow, chair of the Council of Canadians. Links to this kind of lobbying are vital, as there's so much pressure on governments from world trade agreements etc. to sell out education, to sell our future on the open markets.

JH: Watch out for us in Washington in April for the meeting of the International Monetary Fund. CFS is one of many organizations taking members there. People are fed up of governments using the global economy as an excuse. The governments can get the hell out of the way and let us take over. We saw that kind of militancy in Washington. Students, anti-poverty campaigners, health-care workers, everyone got together to bring force to bear. The power behind the international business agenda lies in division, pitting students against workers, for example, while the power of the labour movement lies in solidarity. Our tuition break is not the working class's loss, it has positive repercussions for them and for other disadvantaged groups. People are realising that we have to stand up to the forces behind this cutback and downloading agenda.

SK: We need a global new deal.

JH: But nobody will cut us that deal based on the force of our arguments. We have to shut them down. It's inspiring what the average person can do. Washington will be bigger than Seattle. The naked face of capitalism is only shown when you interrupt it. Direct action makes them bare their fangs (tear gas, pepper spray), but it also gets results. Young people must realize that our health care and education systems didn't just materialize, they were won through a long struggle, and we must continue the struggle in order to defend them.

Ellie Kennedy, Queen's University

Sources and links:

www.cupe.ca/media/20000201.asp

www.cfs.bc.ca/campaign.htm

www.cfs-fcee.ca

<http://216.13.169.140/media/library.htm> click on "action photos"

www.uvss.uvic.ca/~a2k

<http://www.ontariondp.on.ca/education.html>

www.lusu.lakeheadu.ca (for pictures of the "freezin to freeze fees" tent city)