



A little policy can go a long way

All our leaders talked a good game during the campaign. That was the easy part

Columbus discovered America while looking for a shortcut to Asia, and Stephen Harper and company stumbled across an education policy or two while they were beating their breasts and drums on Canada's 2011 election campaign trail.

Good on 'em, I say. For my money, education trumps health care as the most important issue facing the nation.

Sure, we need to get health care right over the next 20 years, as baby boomers learn the hard way that they are not immortal after all. But we need to get education right if Canada is to prosper over the next century. Either we develop a smart economy or we atrophy.

Michael Ignatieff's Liberal party gave voice to this view in the campaign. "Experts estimate that by 2017 we will need to increase the proportion of Canadians who have some form of post-secondary education from 60% to 73% to keep up with this demand for skilled workers," the party platform reads. "And yet, gaps and obstacles to learning persist and grow at all levels."

Ignatieff proposed to throw \$3 billion at a Canadian Learning Strategy over two years. NDP leader Jack Layton promised lower tuition fees and more generous student grants. Harper's Conservatives offered up an *à la carte* menu of educational policies, including an effort to drive R&D through the creation of 30 new Industrial Research Chairs at colleges and universities.

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In short, everyone seems to get it.

About time, too, for the link between education and prosperity is unbreakable. If you don't believe me on this one, check out the newest rankings of American states by per capita income. In 2010, the highest income earners in the U.S. claimed an address in Connecticut and Massachusetts; the lowest earners lived in Mississippi and Idaho. And guess what? Residents of Connecticut are almost twice as likely as Mississippians to hold university degrees. (This I take from the work of Syed Basher and Nils-Peter Lagerlof, two York University economists whose research establishes a link between per capita incomes and university education.)

In Atlantic Canada, we cling to the notion that those Albertans are luckier than us (with all that resource wealth) but no smarter. Sure, resources can make you rich, while they last. But it is no accident that Canada's wealthiest provinces over the last half century (Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta) also have the highest proportion of university graduates. (See Statistics Canada's latest figures on educational attainment, for the year 2009.)

A discussion of educational attainment seemed several universes re-

moved from the federal election campaign. In general, education policy was buried in the party platforms, not shouted from the podium.

More's the pity.

For if our national political leaders really want to assure "Canada's ongoing prosperity for generations to come," they should co-operatively introduce the innovative policy initiatives that might meet the goals of their soaring electoral rhetoric.

All our leaders talked a good game during the campaign. That was the easy part. The hard part is winning against tougher and tougher international competition.

So how is Canada faring against other advanced economies? Back in 1980, this nation was directing \$2,000 more per student than the U.S. was to university funding. By 2006, the Americans had zoomed past us in the race to build a knowledge economy. By then, per-student funding was \$8,000 higher on the south side of the border. During the same period of time, the Americans continued to soar ahead of us on productivity measures.

I take these figures from a 2010 TD Bank report, *Post-Secondary Education is a Smart Route to a Brighter Future for Canadians*. The title almost says it all, but the text says more. A well and widely educated public can build prosperity, shrink income gaps, drive productivity and help transform Canada into a research and development powerhouse.

In Atlantic Canada, post-secondary education also helps the region attract and retain gifted immigrants while producing well-rounded citizens who make more money, pay more taxes, and contribute more to their communities than others.

In short, our political parties talked a great deal about post-secondary education in the campaign that ended May 2. Now it's time for Canadians to get old-fashioned—in a democratic sort of way—and make sure they do something about it. 7

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