

OCUFA Advocacy Day at Queen's Park – Fall 2018
Root Gorelick

On Tuesday 13 November, I met with MPPs and their staffs from the three largest parties. At breakfast we also heard from the one Green Party MPP. All of them were truly engaged, despite ranging from newly elected members to a party leader.

OCUFA usually convenes Advocacy Day at Queen's Park in March. But I applaud them doing this event sooner, i.e. not long after the new PC government was installed.

I was at Queen's Park two days before the government's fall economic statement was released. Therefore, the hottest topic amongst and NDP and Liberal members and their staffs when I was there was to guess the size of financial cuts to post secondary education in the budget (mini budget). These estimates ranged from a one-time 8% cut to three consecutive 10% annual cuts. Either of these, but especially the latter, would force Carleton to close programs. The good news was that the fall economic statement on thursday and the premier's remarks two days later were so vague, only discussing "looking for efficiencies", and deferring any balancing of the budget at least until the year of the next election. Thus, I am not sure that any draconian cuts will occur. Governments typically do not impose large financial cuts during elections years, but instead spend somewhat recklessly, deficit spending, immediately before elections. The only big cuts announced to post-secondary education were elimination of the three satellite university campuses in the greater Toronto area and elimination of a francophone university in Toronto, for which no money has yet been spent. Given that tuition rates keep going up, which may get far worse with what I suspect will be deregulation of tuition caps (currently 3% for most programs, except 5% for professional programs), the lack of new university campuses will be particularly damaging to young students, many of whom can only afford to attend local universities in order to save on housing costs by living with their parents.

One PC MPP kept asking me about possible efficiencies to defray costs of post-secondary education. I mentioned things like on-line learning and public-private partnerships for new buildings, which save universities some money, at least in the short-term. However, this MPP had far different ideas, such as re-negotiation of hydro rates with Hydro Ottawa or Hydro One. Our contrast on where efficiencies may be found was striking, but indicative of what the government probably has in mind.

The new Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities has apparently been invisible or at least unavailable since the new government was formed. OCUFA staff has not been able to pin her down even for a brief chat. This does not bode well.

At question period, the opposition critic for Training, Colleges and Universities, Chris Glover, basically recited OCUFA's talking points about precarious employment of sessional instructors at colleges and universities. His predecessor, Peggy Sattler, took a similar approach. In the long-term this bodes well, especially if there is ever another NDP government.

While I had an extremely small sample size, PC MPPs and their staffs seemed unaware of the strategic mandate agreements (SMA) imposed by the previous government. This will be an

interesting wildcard. In general, not just with education, the PC strategy is to rescind anything that the Liberals instituted. I would love elimination of the metrics in SMAs, which always seemed about as reflective of reality as student questionnaires of teaching are; see the Kaplan arbitration decision at Ryerson. Getting rid of SMA metrics will really help universities. I plugged conservative philosophy here, which is for a strictly market-based economy. Let potential students' decisions about which university to attend drive university funding, not some cobbled-together silly SMA metrics. However, the danger is that the government could see SMA metrics as a way to cut university funding in a way that was sanctioned by the previous Liberal government, which might be too good for the PC government to resist. This is one area in which effective nuanced lobbying might make a big difference, something that the new OCUFA executive director hopefully realizes.

By the way, the new OCUFA executive director, Michael Conlon, seemed to have an encyclopedic knowledge of his portfolio, which was very impressive given that he had just moved from CUFA BC to OCUFA less than a week earlier. Michael does not have his predecessor's chilled-out demeanor, but he has all the tools he will need, including a very quick synthetic mind and fantastic memory. I suspect we will enjoy working with him.