

Quebec Students Speak Out

SETTING THE STAGE

In February of 2012 thousands of students in Quebec took to the streets to protest a proposed hike in tuition fees introduced by the Liberal government of Jean Charest. The protesting students effectively shut down colleges and universities by boycotting classes and preventing other students from attending. The protesting students also



committed acts of vandalism and snarled traffic. A number of restaurants and bars in downtown Montreal had to close their doors, or limit the hours they were open, because of violent clashes between protestors and police.

Did You Know?

Students have a long history of protest in Quebec. The protest that occurred in the spring of 2012 was the ninth general strike in the history of Quebec's student movement since 1968. This long history of student activism has kept tuition fees in that province low.

The proposed tuition hike would have seen tuition fees increase by 75 per cent over the next five years. The government later changed this to an 80 per cent increase over 7 years. The total amount of the increase would be about \$1,625 or \$325 per year. Current tuition rates in Quebec are approximately \$2,500 a year – less than half of what students in Ontario, British Columbia, and most other Canadian provinces pay.

The provincial Liberal government, under the leadership of Jean Charest, argued that the increases were necessary because tuition fees only actually cover 13 per cent of the total operating costs of colleges and universities. The provincial government, they argued, was paying an ever-increasing percentage of tax revenue to keep post-secondary institutions afloat.

Charest's government argued that this situation was simply not sustainable.

Students, on the other hand, argued that post-secondary education is a democratic right and must be accessible to all. They feared that increased tuition fees would prevent many students from low-income families from obtaining a college or university education.

Certainly, students across the country feel that they pay too much tuition. So why did the protests occur only in Quebec? A poll published in *The Globe and Mail* on May 7, 2012 indicated that over 60 per cent of students across Canada would support a strike against tuition increases. But they also reported that they lacked confidence in the idea that it is possible to fight tuition increases and changes to education.

Quebec differs from the other provinces and territories in that they have a long history of labour activism, including student activism. Student protests against tuition hikes reflect a larger belief within the province that education is a public service that plays an important social role, and should not be a product for sale in a capitalist economy.

The Situation Escalates

The protests continued throughout the spring and as the numbers of protestors kept increasing, and skirmishes between students and the police escalated, Premier Charest finally took action. In May 2012, provincial and city governments passed laws to crackdown on the protests. The legislation approved fines of up to \$125,000 for student groups that break the law, prohibited demonstrations within fifty metres of universities, banned protestors from wearing masks, and required organizers of demonstrations with more than fifty people to inform police that a demonstration would be held, and the route of the demonstration. Officials could reject the protest route if they felt it posed a threat to public-safety.

Five days after the legislation was passed police arrested 518 protestors.

The arrests inflamed the striking students and fuelled their anger at the government. The student movement surged and organizers were

able to get upwards of 300,000 students involved in the protests. The legislation and arrests also served to turn the protests into a fight for civil liberties, just as much as they were marches against increased tuition fees.

The legislation also turned the public against Charest's government. When the student protests initially began in February they did not have a great deal of public support. About two-thirds of the population supported an increase in tuition fees, and the hard line he initially took against the students — refusing to capitulate to their demands — boosted his popularity in the province. But the legislation to crack down on the protests, in contrast, was only supported by about fifty per cent of the population.

Despite the legislation, the protests continued, and thousands of students ended up losing an entire semester of courses. This made many students furious, as well as their parents, who in many cases had paid the tuition for a semester that was lost. When summer break hit, the students vowed that the protests would begin again in September.

Premier Charest decided to call an election for September 4, 2012, in large part because of this issue. His party was defeated, and a minority Parti Quebecois was elected. The new premier, Pauline Marois, will no doubt have to come up with a new solution for this problem.

To Consider

1. How might you feel if you lost a semester of education because of student protest?
2. What other ways might students have shared their anger over proposed tuition increases?
3. Do you think those other options would have had as much impact? Explain.

VIDEO REVIEW

Pre-Viewing Activity

Organize yourself into small groups and respond to the following questions and activities. Make sure you provide reasons for your responses, and be prepared to share your responses with the rest of the class.

1. Is access to post-secondary education something that should be a right for every citizen of Canada? That is, should there be enough college and university spaces to accommodate any citizen in Canada who wants to attend?

2. Should post-secondary education be free? That would mean that the costs of tuition would be covered exclusively by taxes paid by citizens.

3. Should tuition fees be relatively similar in each province and territory in the country? That is, should students living in British Columbia pay the same amount to go to college or university as a student in Nova Scotia or Quebec?

4. Should protestors be able to demonstrate in the streets with their faces covered by masks or another type of disguise?

Viewing Questions

Record your responses to these questions as you view the video.

1. Why did thousands of Quebec students take to the streets in early 2012?

2. Why are tuition fees so much lower in Quebec than in other parts of the country?

3. What specific locations were targeted by protestors?

4. Record some of the provisions of Bill 78, passed by the Charest government in May 2012.

5. Why did this legislation result in an escalation of the protests?

6. Why did Charest say that he had to pass Bill 78?

7. What happened to the size of the protests over the summer?

Post-Viewing Activity

Once you have watched the video, re-visit your responses to the Pre-Viewing questions. Modify your responses based on the new information you learned in the video.

LEARNING ACTIVITY: Considering Multiple Perspectives

When we are trying to make sense of any current event, or historical problem, it is important to make sure you read a variety of perspectives on the issue. Think, for example, what would happen to your own opinion about the student protests if you only read or heard comments from people who agreed with the protests. You would likely be more inclined to decide to support the position of the students, than if you read and heard comments from a variety of perspectives.

Furthermore, if you only read or heard opinions that supported one side of an issue, you might not even be aware that there were other, competing perspectives on the issue.

Your Task

Read the selection of quotes that appear below. Reflect on those comments, and then prepare your own written response to the question:

Do you support the actions of Quebec students who are against the proposed tuition hike for university?

In your response, make sure you comment on:

the proposed tuition hike itself

the demonstrations

the anti-protest legislation introduced by the government

Viewpoints on Quebec's Student Protests

// It is beyond debate that a university degree provides substantial economic benefits to the holder. The average after-tax income boost enjoyed by a university graduate is on the order of \$15,000. Per year. Society at large may benefit from a well-educated workforce, but these gains are disproportionately weighted toward students themselves. It's only proper that students pay their fair share. **//**

Editorial, Maclean's, May 21, 2012

// There will likely be more protests, as students have every reason to be angry at tuition increases, the declining quality of education and grim job prospects upon graduation. Governments and employers are clear-cutting good jobs, slashing social programs and attacking migrant rights in the name of austerity, leaving post-secondary graduates facing debt and precariousness after an impersonal and often unsatisfactory education. **//**

Xavier Lafrance and Alan Sears, Briarpatch, July-August 2012

“ Canadians are often preoccupied with our public health care and apathetic about our publicly funded schools. But our universities might just be in as rough shape as our hospitals. ‘The trends are for classes to get larger, for courses to become less available, and for more and more teaching to be done by sessional and itinerant teachers,’ said Harvey Weingarten, president of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, in a speech last year.

Students are less satisfied and less engaged than their American peers, says Weingarten. They are also graduating with more than \$25 000 of debt, on average, into a job market that offers little chance of paying it off. Meanwhile, the Conference Board of Canada found this country placed eighth out of 16 peer nations for the production of scientific articles, one key contribution universities make to the economy by driving research and development. ”

James Cowan, Canadian Business, June 14, 2012