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**Student Organizations in Canada and Quebec’s 'Maple Spring'**

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**Abstract:**

*This article has two major objectives: to describe the structure of the student movement in Canada and the formal role of students in higher education governance, and to describe and analyse the ‘Maple Spring,’ the dramatic mobilization of students in opposition to proposed tuition fee increased in Quebec that eventually led to a provincial election and the fall of the government. Based on an analysis of documents, news reports, and a small number of interviews with student leaders, the article will analyse what became the largest student protest movement in Canadian history.*

Keywords: student organizations, Canada, Quebec, Maple Spring, student protests

**Introduction**

Our objectives in this article are to provide an overview of the structure of student organizations in Canada and their role in university governance, and then to describe and analyse the 'Maple Spring,' the dramatic mobilization of students in opposition to proposed tuition increases in Quebec that eventually led to a provincial election and the fall of the government. We will begin by conceptualizing student organizations as political pressure groups, and then reviewing the major structural characteristics of Canadian student organizations and the role of students in university governance. We will then turn to the special case of the student protests in Quebec in 2012.

**Student Organizations as Pressure Groups**

Our focus is on students organizations as pressure groups, which can be defined as “an organization whose members act together to influence public policy in order to promote their common interest” (Pross 1986, 11). Pressure groups are conceptually linked to pluralist political theory and the assumption that individuals have interests and will take steps to further those interests. Pross argues that pressure groups can be differentiated from other types of groups by applying five basic criteria: organization, a desire for influence, membership, common interest, and substantial autonomy in the use of resources. Student organizations as pressure groups are therefore relatively distinct from numerous other forms of student groups which may be based on common interests but which do not have the other organizational characteristics associated with a political pressure group. In this article we will use the term “student organization” to refer to the formally recognized pressure group that represents student interests at the institutional or system levels of authority. Pross (1986) argues that the ability of a pressure group to influence power is largely a function of its organizational capacity (e.g. membership, resources, knowledge of the political system, and clear objectives).

**Student Organizations and University Governance in Canada**

While there has been a long history of student organizations and student activism in Canada, the current structural arrangements are rooted in four major changes that took place in the post-WWII period. The first important change was the gradual movement away from a university-student relationship defined by *in loco parentis*. Veterans returning from the war enrolled in universities in large numbers, and these new students were generally older and less tolerant of paternalistic university policies. By the 1960s, university students were generally viewed as independent adults, and student organizations shifted from working under the parental supervision of the university, to become legitimate autonomous organizations independent of the university. Student organizations frequently became legally incorporated as not-for-profit corporations. This view of university students as “almost” adults was finally abandoned when each provincial government, by the early 1970s, had decreased the legal age of majority from 21 to 18 or 19.

While there were variations in the funding arrangements for student organizations over time, by the 1960s institution-based student organizations had established mandatory student fees that were collected by the university. Mandatory fees meant that student organizations had a secure, and, in the context of the massive expansion of higher education during this period, a rapidly expanding, source of income. At larger universities this income allowed organizations to support full-time elected officials as well as professional staff. Student organization fees supported the advocacy activities of the organization, but they also supported a range of member services, including, in some cases, university pubs, social events, copying services, and providing financial support to student interest clubs. In British Columbia, section 27.1 of the *University Act* explicitly requires universities to collect student fees on behalf of institution-level student organizations and protects the rights of organizations to increase fees subject to a successful student referendum. Quebec law differentiates between CEGEPS, where rights are assigned to institution-level student organizations, and universities, where rights are assigned to organizations operating at the level of the accredited unit (department or faculty); universities are required to collect fees on behalf of these organizations, and provide them with physical space, and a minimal level of human resources (Poirier St-Pierre and Éthier 2013). For example, at the University of Montreal, each department has its statutory organization and these organizations created a federation at the institution level (FAECUM). The associations may also join one of the three provincial federations; yet the decision-making body in which students have direct control remains at the level of the accredited unit.

A third major change involved the reform of university governance in Canada which took place during the 1960s and 1970s. Most universities had adopted a bicameral governance structure involving a governing board, with responsibility for the administrative affairs of the university, and a senate, with responsibility for academic policy. Faculty and students demanded a much larger role in university governance, and during this period every Canadian university revised its governance arrangements in order to increase internal representation within the governance process. No university had students on its board in 1955 but, by 1975, 78% of universities had at least one student board member (Jones 1996), and by 1995, there were student members on every surveyed university board (Jones and Skolnik 1997). Similar changes were made to the composition of university senates, and students now represent, on average, approximately 16% of all university senate members (Pennock et al. 2012). Student members of university senates and boards are usually elected by broadly defined academic constituencies; students directly elect representatives to these governing bodies, as well as electing the leadership of student organizations that advocate on their behalf at the institutional and system level. The same basic principles that were adopted under the governance reforms have usually been extended to other decision processes within universities. The process for selecting a university president frequently involves a recommendation to the board from a search committee composed of faculty, students and other constituency representatives. Student associations can be found at the department and faculty levels of every university, and students participate in academic councils operating at various levels of the institution, as well as advisory committees and institutional task forces.

In addition to this formal representation in university governance processes, university student organizations play important roles in advocating for the interests of their members through their frequent interactions with university administration. These legally independent organizations can be viewed as institutionalized pressure groups, to use Pross’s (1986) categorization, in that they have a defined membership, stable resources (including the capacity to hire professional staff), and they are largely embedded within institutional policy networks in that they frequently participate in institutional decision processes and are regularly asked for advice on student issues (Jones 1995).

Student pressure groups can also be found operating at the provincial and federal levels of authority. Under Canada’s constitutional arrangements the responsibility for education is assigned to the provinces, and it is the provinces, rather than the federal government, that play the major role in terms of funding, coordinating and regulating higher education. With this in mind, institution-based student organizations in most provinces have joined together to create one (or more) umbrella organizations designed to represent the student interests of member organizations in provincial policy discussions. While they do not play a formal role in government decision-making structures, provincial student organizations have become quite important advocates in discussions of tuition fees and student financial assistance, both of which are usually regulated at the provincial level. We will discuss the student associations in Quebec in more detail in the next section.

There is also a long history of national student organizations, though there has been some fluidity in terms of institutional membership and ideological position. Student organizations at the national level lobby the federal government on a range of government policy issues, including student financial assistance (the Canada Student Loans program, tax credits related to student educational costs), provincial transfers, scholarship and research funding. National organizations also frequently provide coordination support to provincial and institutional associations as part of lobbying campaigns. There are currently two major national student organizations. Founded in 1981, the Canadian Federation of Students (CSF 2013) aims at providing a united voice in order to defend the interests of one-half million student members of 80 university and college student unions. The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) was founded in 1995 by a number of university student associations who saw a need for a national association but disliked the more left-wing, radical approach associated with CFS. The Alliance currently represents approximately 30 organizations located across the country. It is interesting to note that neither of these national organizations currently have strong links with Quebec student organizations.

**The Quebec Student Movements**

If Canadian student organizations benefit from a favorable organizational structure to influence university governance, a review of specific events can be illustrative in terms of exploring the diversity of their tactics and the extent of their capacity to influence the political process. This article will take the example of the 2012 Quebec Maple Spring (in French, maple - *érable* - sounds like Arab) and describe the role of student associations in the biggest and longest student protest in Canadian history. According to the media information broker Influence Communication (2012), the 2012 Quebec student strike was the subject of more than 3,000 news stories from 77 different countries. Moreover, an analyst from that firm reported to Blachford (2012) that "the student crisis generated 66-times more foreign news coverage in two months than Canada's entire mission in Afghanistan". Our analysis of these protests is based on a review of 60 of the most detailed and informative reports published in mainstream Canadian, American and European newspapers in order to provide an accurate overview of the sequence of key events. Our analysis of key documents and reports was supplemented by interviews with representatives from three student organizations, two in Quebec and one in another Canadian province.

In order to understand these events it is important to briefly examine the unique political history of higher education in this province. Up until the 1960s, the Quebec education system was run by the clergy. In that system, student associations were responsible for sport and cultural events. Yet, the tradition of activism started in the mid-1950s when the Catholic Studying Youth (JEC) started the Student National Press (PEN), and the Catholic French-Canadian Youth Association called for a 24 hour strike to protest the Quebec Premier's refusal of federal government transfers to higher education (Gagnon 2008).

The dramatic reforms to Quebec higher education that took place during the 1960s were key components of a broader social and political transformation that is commonly referred to as the Quiet Revolution. The Government of Quebec embraced values such as democratic access to education, autonomy of institutions, secularism and regional representation. It established the Ministry of Education, 48 general and vocational colleges (CEGEPs), two graduate institutes, and a network of Universités du Québec with campuses located in most major regions (CSE 2008). In 1968, PEN and the General Union of Quebec Students (UGEQ) radicalized. For instance, they were opposed to lectures and exams, proposed the nationalization of private teaching institutions and requested co-management in universities and a status of "animators" for professors (Gagnon 2008). PEN transformed its movement so that it had no leader and workshops would replace conferences. The UGEQ dissolved in 1969 and its successor (ANEEQ) only survived until the mid-1990s.

Today, four associations represent Quebec students. Founded in 1989, the Quebec Federation of University Students (FEUQ) distinguished itself from more radical associations by adopting a responsible approach and fighting for a tuition freeze instead of their complete abolition (AGEsshalcUQAM 2013). It developed the 'New Partnership' principle in which governments, institutions, students and businesses must work together to improve quality and accessibility in universities. Similar to the FEUQ, the Quebec Federation of CEGEP Students (FECQ) was founded in 1990 by students who preferred dialogue over confrontation. Its main demands concern student aid, regional representation and frozen university tuition fee levels (Lacoursière 2007).

In 2001, inspired by the alter-globalization movement, the most militant students founded the Association for a Student Syndical Solidarity (ASSE 2013) in order to promote a form of combative student syndicalism. ASSE believes that compromises push Quebec backward, and that no negotiation can take place before a real power balance is established (Poirier St-Pierre and Ethier 2013). While FECQ and FEUQ's structure of representative democracy gives more leeway to presidents, ASSE uses a form of direct democracy in which spokespersons (a man and a woman, one coming from the CEGEP sector and the other from the university sector) can only report what has been decided by the Congress. In terms of ideology, ASSE fights for the abolition of tuition fees, but also for equal access to public services, ecology, Native rights and gender equality (Poirier St-Pierre and Ethier 2013). The last group is the Discussion Table for Quebec Students (TaCEQ). It is the smallest association (63,409 members) and it serves as a forum for different local associations which do not have to pay a membership fee (Grihalva et al*.* 2012).

Unlike students in other Canadian provinces, Quebec students are used to strikes and to obtaining gains through strikes. In 1968, they went on strike for tuition fees; in 1974 for more funding and loans; in 1978 for accessible loans and scholarships; in 1986 for a tuition freeze; in 1988 for aid for part-time students; in 1990 and 1994 to fight against tuition increases; in 2005 to oppose the conversion of student funding grants into loans; and in 2007 and 2012 against tuition increases (CLASSE 2013). The 2012 strike mobilized students from quite a number of communities across the province and was by far the largest student protest in Quebec history (Beauchemin 2012). Because of its militancy, the Quebec student movement appears to be distinctive from other student movements in other provinces, yet it is difficult to identify the roots of this difference without stereotyping. Systemic explanations are presented below and include the social-democratic ideals supporting the Quiet Revolution, a greater tolerance of the population towards activism, and the structure of the higher education system (including the militancy within CEGEPs).

**The Maple Spring**

Like many governments in the world, the Quebec Liberal Government began implementing austerity measures in 2009. The 2010-2011 budget announced increases in different types of user fees, including a $1,625 increase in tuition fees (from approximately $2200 to approximately $3800) over a five year period. Inspired by the discourse and mobilization techniques used by Chilean and British students as well as by the Occupy Movement, Quebec students prepared a response that would extend to the whole issue of commodifying public goods (CIC 2012; Stangler 2012). For instance, the ASSE, the Quebec Women's Federation, the Social Alliance and some unions and labour councils formed the Coalition Against Fee Increases (Rashi 2011). In 2011 ASSE began spending time on campuses to inform students of the issues, identify people who could play key roles in mobilizing the student body, and encourage associations to have a political action plan. ASSE then formed CLASSE, a larger coalition that included all ASSE members, plus any association (including FECQ and FEUQ members) that had a mandate from their members for a strike, supported the abolition of tuition fees, and accepted horizontal decision-making. CLASSE developed a manifesto against tuition fees, as well as for collegiality and greater social justice.

After a successful one-day strike in November 2011, CLASSE called for a general student strike. Strikes started in February, 2012 and by March 22nd they included more than 300,000 students (75% of the student population). The same day, between 150,000 and 200,000 students and citizens walked in the streets of Montreal to condemn the tuition increase. Yet, the student mobilizations varied across Quebec. While eight departments at McGill University and six at Concordia University voted for the strike, the majority of the students in Anglophone institutions remained in class (Beaudoin-Laarman 2012; Delacour 2012). Moreover, while strikes happened in most cities, more than half of all CEGEPs did not go on strike (none in Quebec City, for example) and the majority who did were from the Greater Montreal Area (ASSÉ 2012; Vézina 2012).

Nonetheless, picket lines, strikes, protests and nightly demonstrations continued for six months. In April, the Quebec Liberal Party's (PLQ) congress in Victoriaville was surrounded by protesters and the situation escalated, with both students and police officers being badly hurt. Given the length of the strike, some students wanted to return to class to finish the academic term, and, for the first time in the history of the Quebec student movement, students sought and obtained court injunctions forcing institutions to open their doors and faculty to teach their courses (Gill 2012).

On May 18th, 2012 the Government passed Bill 78. This legislation was designed to reduce the impact of the protest by forcing professors to teach their courses and forbidding associations from blocking the entrance to universities and colleges. Associations that did not comply with the legislation could lose their official recognition accreditation and be subject to fines. Importantly, the legislation also included provisions that were designed to limit protests, including requiring that the itinerary of every protest march of more than 50 people had to be provided to the police at least eight hours in advance.

There were also tensions with law enforcement. In a report based on 384 testimonials, the League for Rights and Freedoms, (Ligue des droits et libertés), the Association of Progressive Lawyers (Association des juristes progressistes) and ASSE (2013) concluded that police forces conducted 31 mass arrests (totaling 2,913 people) under either the Highway Safety Code, the Criminal Code, Bill 78 or municipal bylaws. These tensions polarized the population and, because the Government had been in power for nine years and was weighed down by allegations of corruption in public hearings taking place at the time, many groups, artists and citizens joined the students (Gill 2012). Quebec artists also brought the cause to the Cannes Film Festival and *Saturday Night Live*. Professors, senior citizens, feminists and parents founded different groups to support students (Ostrovsky 2012) who were also supported by the Canadian Federation of Students, the Canadian Association of University Teachers and the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

Students used both mass and social media to disseminate their message. Chouinard (2013) noted that in a long battle such as the protests in 2012, students had to find original ways to maintain the attention of the media. For instance, students in design at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) founded the School of the Red Mountain, which created serigraphs and the expression 'Maple Spring'. Students in theater presented silent choreographies in Montreal subway stations. Students in urban studies covered monuments and trees with red banners, and other students initiated sewing groups, backward walks, and symbolic weddings.

Outside Canada, filmmaker Michael Moore called for international support of the Quebec student movement. On his Twitter account, he wrote: "Canadians are in revolt in Quebec over new gov’t law limiting democratic rights. No news of it in US press. Their uprising is inspiring" (in Deehas 2012). On May 22nd, citizens in Austin, Boston, Denver and Washington walked in the streets in support of the Quebec strikers (Stangler 2012). Scholars acknowledge that the Quebec phenomenon was part of a global reaction against deregulation, and that it used similar tools, such as 'aesthetic protests', humor and social media (CIC 2012).

The protest movement placed considerable pressure on the Liberal Government. The protests continued to receive considerable media attention and became a focal point for a wide range of pressure groups already fighting against fees, privatization and outsourcing in the public services. Unwilling to bend on its tuition fee policies and mired in controversy surrounding both the protest movement and continuing corruption hearings, the government resigned on August 1st and called an election hoping to obtain a renewed mandate. The Quebec student organizations campaigned to encourage students to vote. The September 4th elections results led the Parti Québécois to form a minority government. It moved (a day after the election) to roll-back the tuition fee increases and then to index fees based on inflation.

**Assessing the Maple Spring:**

It is far too early to provide a comprehensive assessment of the 2012 student protests in Quebec, in part because the protests led to a series of chain reactions with important implications for higher education and Quebec society that are still ongoing. For example, a government commission established to review the events in order to make recommendations on police practices and on approaches that may make future protests more peaceful is just beginning as we write this article (fall 2013). According to Serge Ménard, the head of this commission, between February and September, 2012, 532 demonstrations were held in Montreal involving about 750,000 demonstrators and 34,260 police officers (Rakobowchuk and Arsenault 2013).

While a comprehensive assessment is difficult, it is quite clear that the Maple Spring was a distinctive political and social event in the history of higher education in Quebec, and in Canada. As showed in Table 1, we believe that the mammoth nature of the protest (both in size and length) can be explained by a series of systemic, strategic, and circumstantial factors that contributed to its distinctive nature.

Table 1. Systemic, circumstantial and strategic factors.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Systemic** | **Circumstantial** | **Strategic** |
| Values | Democratic access to higher education;  Acceptance of activism. | University underfunding;  University financial 'scandals'. | Alternative discourse;  Argument that universities were poorly managed. |
| Structure | Mobilization in CEGEPs;  Power of student organizations;  History of success. | Injunctions;  Bill 78; | Sequence of votes on general strike;  Pact between associations. |
| Politics | Close relationships between some organizations and some political parties. | Hearings on government corruption;  Reaction to Bill 78;  Election. | Cooperation between organizations; 'Wedge politics';  Campaign to encourage young people to vote. |
| Support | History of collaboration with workers' unions and community groups. | Media coverage;  Support from Occupy movements and international stars. | Escalation of tactics;  Leaders' charisma;  Utilization of mass and social media. |

*Systemic Factors*

According to social exchange theory, the influence of pressure groups depends on their power structure and strategies (Blau 1964). In this case, the power structure of the student movement was influenced by the organization of the Quebec higher education system. The modernization of Quebec’s educational system was based on the Parent Commission's reports of the 1960s, which explicitly valued the autonomy of the learner, democratic access to education, and free higher education (Rocher 2008). The debate over tuition in Quebec is not simply about the level of user fees, but rather the issue is embedded in a much broader vision of the role of higher education, and the discourse used by the student movement is based on a set of social-democratic values that resonate with the collective imaginary of Quebec society (Fisher et al. 2009). A second important systemic factor is the long tradition of student activism within the Quebec CEGEPs. GEGEPs are public and free higher education institutions that offer general education, pre-university education and technical training. They play an intermediary role in the Quebec higher education system since students pursuing university must complete a two year pre-university program before transitioning to the university sector. CEGEP student associations have been granted the same rights as university associations, meaning that CEGEPs must provide student associations with physical space and human resources. However, unlike university students who vote on strikes by department or faculties, the 162,300 regular and 29,110 continuing CEGEP students (MELS 2008) vote by institution, so obtaining a strike vote provides considerable legitimacy to student activists and provides a strong foundation for student mobilization. One of the interviewees argued that no effective student strike can be initiated without the participation of the CEGEPs. The 2012 strikes started with strike votes in CEGEP de Valleyfield, then in St-Jérôme and Drummondville, thus creating a snowball effect on both CEGEP and university campuses (Poirier St-Pierre and Éthier, 2013). Finally, Quebec student pressure groups are organized (i.e. permanent staff and automatic membership fees), include all Quebec students, are autonomous from the Government, and have common objectives on particular issues. The provincial student organizations had the resources and the time to organize transportation, material and visibility for the protests.

*Strategic Factors*

The strategies employed by the student movement in 2011 and 2012 can be broadly characterized as diverse but coherent. The FECQ and FEUQ can both be seen as institutionalized pressure groups that have become part of the Quebec higher education policy community. They produce studies and reports on higher education issues, and their lobbying activities include frequent contact with government officials and relevant stakeholder groups. These organizations use rational arguments to advocate on behalf of their members and negotiate with the government. This strategy was ineffective in mobilizing students, but it became effective when it was time to work directly with government to negotiate a path forward following the strike.

CLASSE, in sharp contrast, was an issue-oriented pressure group that was far more interested in changing the system than working within it, and its ruptural metamorphosis strategy (Aitchison 2011), referred to as an 'escalation of tactics', was designed to mobilize enough students and citizens to shift the balance of power. CLASSE took a series of strategic steps designed to facilitate mobilization and gradually intensify the protest, beginning with petitions that encouraged students to commit themselves to political action, organizing symbolic actions (e.g. flashmobs) designed to attract the attention of media, the population and other students, and then holding a one-day strike as a symbolic ultimatum to the Government and provided students with a sense that they were part of a broader political movement (Poirier St-Pierre and Éthier 2013). CLASSE managed the strike vote process very strategically; they asked the most militant organizations to vote first, and then encouraged local organizations s to follow an order so that no student organizations would vote against the strike (Taylor 2012).

This ruptural macro-strategy was combined with a micro-strategy of interstitial metamorphosis within associations. Like the 2010 occupation in United Kingdom (Rheingans and Hollands 2013), CLASSE created a marginal space in which students could collectively reinvent a political process based on horizontality and participative democracy. Like Occupy, the student movement became a live response to the 'there is no alternative discourse'. Yet in order to be successful in its objectives of changing society, it needed to adapt its communication strategy. While the objective of FECQ and FEUQ was to convince the general public through sound arguments, the objective CLASSE achieved was to target the 5%-10% of the population that would join them in the streets (i.e. wedge politics). To do so, it needed to exploit emotions, break the 'liberal consensus', and polarize groups in order to bring 'moderates' into activism (Poirier St-Pierre and Éthier, 2013).

Another important strategic factor was that the provincial student organizations had decided to work together and avoid political fragmentation. Representatives from these very different student organizations were able to elaborate a 'minimal agreement' according to which organizations would 1) recognize that they are stronger together, 2) refuse to negotiate if one organization is not present, 3) never recommend how local organizations should vote on government proposal, 4) and never criticize what another organization does (Poirier St-Pierre and Éthier 2013). Working together, the collective was able to disseminate a coherent message that appealed both to emotions and reason.

*Circumstantial Factors*

There were a number of very important circumstantial factors that contributed to the distinctive nature of the 2012 protests. One factor was the gradual shift in political relationships between the student organizations and university leaders. Since the 1990s, the Quebec universities have argued that they have been seriously underfunded compared to the Canadian average, a gap estimated at $620 million (CREPUQ 2012). While university administrators had previously collaborated with FEUQ to lobby the Government for more public funding, the relationship shifted in the mid-2000s when university leaders argued that increasing tuition fees was an important part of the solution to the funding problem. From the perspective of student organizations, the under-funding argument was undermined by increases in administrative expenditures (FEUQ 2011), rectors' salaries (IRIS 2010) as well as by real estate scandals (Ménard 2011). As one of the interviewees reported, FEUQ and FECQ effectively used these elements to argue that universities could increase the quality of their education without increasing fees by limiting their administrative expenses.

A second important circumstantial factor was that, unlike earlier student strikes, the Government waited two months before negotiating with the student organizations. The unwillingness of the government to compromise exacerbated the tension. The situation became more contentious and polarized as the strike progressed. Some students who had voted against the strikes went to court to obtain injunctions forcing their institutions to deliver courses. The collective right to education (the discourse of the protests) was challenged by an individual right to education (the arguments from those who wanted to return to their courses). Hébert (2013) says the 50 injunctions have resulted in a 'loss of innocence' for student movements. There had been a legal vacuum on the legitimacy of strikes, so students had established a 'customary right'. Yet the formal rights of individual students asserted through the injunctions changed the situation: universities were forced to open their doors, professors were required to teach, and student organizations could be found in contempt of court if they tried to prevent students from attending classes.

Two other important circumstantial factors were associated with the government. The approval of Bill 78 greatly limited the right to protest. While the Premier attempted to attract support for a ‘public order’ response to a long period of disruptive protest marches, many citizens reacted quite negatively to what they perceived to be an attack on the legitimate right to protest. A second factor was that, completely independent of the protest movement, the Quebec Commission of Inquiry on the Construction Industry began to hold public hearings, which included evidence of corruption on the part of construction contractors and some provincial and municipal politicians. Segments of the population walked in the streets every evening with pots and pans to express their disapproval of a government that appeared both corrupt and authoritarian.

Most student leaders admit that, in the end, they did not control the protests. Inclusive and easy to understand, the discourse was taken and adapted by diverse groups of students and citizens. In addition to the 'pots and pans' marches, groups all over Quebec initiated conferences, discussions and protests around the broad issues of education and social justice (Dubé and Grenier 2013).

*Outcomes of the Protest*

There is little doubt that the protest had a significant impact on the Quebec government. The protests played a key role in the fall of the government and the decision of the new government to roll back and then index fees. Students brought the issues of accessibility, quality and funding to the forefront, and effectively called for a major policy discussion of higher education and its important role in Quebec society.

However, events following the strike suggest a more complex picture of implications and consequences. One important impact of the protests was a reduction in tuition fee revenues for universities since the new government rolled-back fees that the institutions had already budgeted for. This was later accompanied by a substantial reduction in government grants to the universities, further exacerbating their budgetary problems. In the spring of 2013 the Quebec government announced that tuition fees would increase annually, indexed to a calculation of the growth of household income (2.67% in 2013-2014).

Perhaps more importantly, there are signals that the protests have led to a destabilization and disruption of the traditional power relationships associated with the Quebec higher education policy community, especially within the university sector. The government organized Summit on Higher Education took place in February, 2013 and this has led to the creation of a series of working groups on key issues, including issues of institutional governance. One working group proposed the creation of a Quebec Council of Universities that would coordinate program offerings across the province; another proposed a single universities charter that would replace the separate pieces of legislation that create and govern each university in order to promote uniformity. Moreover, there are signs that the Conference of Quebec University Rectors (CREPUQ) might implode in response to differences of opinion within its membership over strategy and over the effectiveness and representativeness of CREPUQ’s advocacy activities. There is therefore a general sense that the protests have led to a weakening of the political influence of the universities, and left the sector more fragile in the face of possible government intervention and reform.

**Conclusion**

Our objectives were to provide an overview of the structure of student organizations in Canada and their role in university governance, and to analyse the student protests that happened in Quebec in 2012. Students play an important role in Canadian university governance and are represented in all major governing bodies at all levels within these institutions. University-level student organizations have considerable organizational capacity (stable membership, mandatory fees, paid staff) and can be viewed as institutionalized pressure groups working within university policy networks (Jones 2002). There are also student pressure groups functioning at the provincial and federal levels of authority. Building upon their organizational capacity (membership, resources, paid staff and official recognition), using innovative strategies to maintain media coverage and pressure on the provincial government, and benefiting from circumstantial factors as well as the unique political context of Quebec, student organizations in the province engaged in a protest that was unique in Canadian history because of its length and size, the magnitude of media attention that it received (in Canada and internationally), and its impact on the Quebec government and the provincial higher education system. The Maple Spring provides an extreme example of student activism in Canada and while it is too early to provide a detailed assessment of the outcomes of the protest, it is already clear that the student organizations failed to achieve their objective of freezing tuition fee levels, though the level of increase was moderated by the new government, The student organizations were successful in promoting an alternative to the neo-liberal discourse. Further, the protests have destabilized the Quebec system and they may have weakened the political influence of the universities and their provincial association.

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