

Education in Quebec

Free lunches, please

OTTAWA

Protests against tuition fee increases could help an unpopular government

IN THE past year students protesting over the cost of university education in business-friendly Chile have captured the world's attention. In recent months their counterparts in statist Quebec have taken up the cause. Since February about a third of the province's 450,000 university students have boycotted classes to oppose the tuition-fee increases planned by Jean Charest, the province's Liberal premier. Some have blocked roads and vandalised government buildings. On April 25th and 26th around 115 people were arrested, following evening protests that turned into window-smashing in central Montreal.

Quebeckers have long seen cheap university education as a birthright. The decision by the centrist Liberals to double fees in 1990 was one reason why they lost con-

trol of the province. Their successor was the separatist Parti Québécois (pq), which responded to a student strike in 1996 by freezing tuition fees for 11 years.

But Mr Charest is now in a fiscal squeeze. He has promised to cut a C\$3.8 billion (\$3.8 billion) deficit to C\$1.5 billion this year. Quebec spends 4-6% of its budget on universities, mainly because its fees are the lowest among Canadian provinces. In humanities and social sciences, which have the highest share of striking students, Quebec charges C\$2,845 and C\$2,629 a

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year, a bit over half the average in all other provinces. To help close the gap, Mr Charest proposed raising annual fees by a total of C\$1,625 over the next five years.

When the protests began the government vowed not to negotiate. It soon backtracked, proposing making student loans easier to get, linking repayment to income after graduation, stretching the fee increase over seven years and offering an additional C\$39m in bursaries. But the student groups insist on an absolute tuition freeze.

Their hard line may help Mr Charest at a tough time. He would love to call an election before an inquiry into corruption in Quebec's construction industry, which may leave his party squirming, begins in June. But his government is unpopular: an April poll found that 73% of Quebeckers are unhappy with its performance.

The opposition pq has allied itself with the protesters, even putting the students' red-square logo on its website. That may prove unwise: a recent online poll found that 79% of Quebeckers oppose raising income taxes to pay for universities. If the Liberals can tie the pq to the movement's intransigence, Mr Charest might yet risk an early vote and hope to eke out a win. •



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