



21 Pacey Drive
Room 31
Students' Union Building
Fredericton, NB
E3B 5A3
Main Office:
+1-506-460-0301

David Coon Student Community Gathering Event Transcription - July 6th, 2020

David Coon's Introduction:

Thank you to everyone for joining in tonight, this is great. I never had any kind of lifelong dream of being a politician at all until I decided that it might be something I am interested in pursuing between 2006 and 2008. Ultimately, I ran for the leadership of the Green Party in 2012 and that was really the first time I did anything in politics. I won the leadership and then two years later I was elected as the first Green MLA outside of British Columbia in Canada. Then, of course, in the subsequent election, two more Greens were elected in New Brunswick; Kevin Arsenaault from Kent North and Megan Mitton from Memramcook-Tantramar, and over on Prince Edward Island, they formed the official opposition.

So now I have been part of the Legislative Assembly for almost 6 years representing Fredericton South and I have sponsored quite a few pieces of legislation. Some of them influence the government positively to introduce their own versions and one of them was adopted. It is always difficult for opposition members to get their bills passed so it was quite an achievement. We have another one that might be passed by September before the House as well.

Briefly, in terms of jurisdiction, the provincial government is responsible for things like healthcare, social services, public education, post secondary education, the environment which is shared with Ottawa, and farming and forestry. Fisheries are federal, as is immigration, trade, and external affairs. That is a rough sense of how things break down provincially versus federally.

Question: The first question submitted by a student is regarding the Canadian Student Service Grant, which is a federal grant. They just wanted to see if Mr. Coon had any words of encouragement or advice for students who are still waiting for placements with this grant?

Mr. Coon: I think these are unusual times, so everything that would routinely happen is happening more slowly because governments at all levels are tied up with responding to the COVID pandemic and planning for the next wave and the assistance that is necessary to keep people whole. I have a bird's eye view of that as a member of the COVID Cabinet Committee in New Brunswick. It is quite unprecedented to swear in leaders of all the opposition parties into a committee of cabinet to deal with the pandemic and it has been working very well. But I have been working a lot and seeing how the inner mechanics of the government works at that top



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level and the pandemic has preoccupied so many people working in the system so all other things have slowed down. I would not worry too much. It is just a matter of time and things will come along. I do see that in a lot of different aspect of government and they are starting to make that shift now into standing things back up and getting them back on track as we speak. It should not be much longer.

Question: Something that has been concerning a lot of students is returning to school in the fall term and we know that tuition is going to increase, continuing with the MOU that our university has. I was just wondering if you had any thoughts on whether we should be given more support to try and cope with the COVID situation as there are lots of people with financial difficulties going into the classes in the fall term.

Mr. Coon: I think the situation demands that the governments increase their supports to universities for a lot of reasons. Looking at professors having to teach themselves or participate in classes to learn how to transfer their teaching online in no small feat. It is not simply, as you could well imagine, just converting what you teach in the classroom online. You have to approach it quite differently to provide something that is effective, interesting and compelling. So, there are a lot of dimension to this that I do not think either the provincial or federal governments have recognized that are going to require some additional support. Now, the next MOU's are about to be negotiated so this surely will be part of that negotiation.

Well every fall, the universities appear before the committee of the legislature so that will be a good opportunity to speak with university presidents and senior staff about questions around tuition and support for students and assuring that the type of education students have access to during a pandemic is of the same kind of quality you get in the classroom. Again, that is not just a snap of the fingers. I think some professors are struggling more than others to sort all of that out. You know your professors better than anyone and you can well imagine that some of them are going to manage online differently than others. The cost, in a sense, are going up for universities if they are doing this correctly including hardware costs to outfit classrooms with technology in some cases that they do not have currently. None of that should be born by students, I guess is my point. It is the responsibility of both levels of government to recognize the increased needs and that they pick those up. And, of course, we know the share of funding that the federal government provides for post secondary education, just like for health, has dropped over time and we need to return to that originally sharing arrangement which would be really helpful to take what has become a growing burden off the students.



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Question: Given your personal experience with the Legislature, would putting forward asks or recommendations from separate bodies, so having our students put forward an ask and then have our teachers union and the university, would be better or worse than putting together a collective ask from our organizations united and if you had any recommendation as to which would be more effective.

Mr. Coon: Well if you think you can get a united ask together fairly quickly and it really represents what you want rather than something that gets watered down so everyone agrees with it, that would be the most effective thing. There is no question about it. To have that common front presented to government. That is a tactical question, I guess, in terms of weighing the possibility of all of that or getting out there now. UNBSU and STU have already put forward requests around a couple of things regarding the rules of getting out of leases for students who will not be coming to town and will be doing their studies online, and also the particular needs of international students. Common front is generally way better but I would not sacrifice that goal if it looks like it might be something arduous to get and in the end what might come out of it is watered down so much it does not serve your purpose.

I did not mention it at the beginning but most of my previous career I was doing advocacy work for the Conservation Council of New Brunswick which was focused on government policies. One of the things I learned is that you advocate for what you want because there will often be some compromise when it gets to government. Too many people go into it with the idea that we are going to make our request reasonable, in other words you compromise before you even present the request to government, then start organizing to achieve it. It is way better to put what you really want on the table then work to get that and be prepared to compromise some on your actual ask but do not water it down before you get to the bickering back and forth. That is just human nature. In any group someone is going to say that we cannot be saying this, we need to be reasonable. But you need to ask for what you need with the proposals that you feel are the best, then that is when you push and see what you can work out from it. Because, every time, government will chip away at what it is to get it to a place where they feel most comfortable so you might as well as start where you want to be rather than half way down where it will only be chipped away further.

Question: What are your thoughts on the provincial government looking at ways of helping New Brunswick students subsidize the prices of different technologies, such as computers, cameras, microphones, or whatever it may be, to help cover those costs?



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Mr. Coon: Yes, absolutely, there has got to be a recognition that all these new costs and some sort of a new package will have to be worked out to ensure that that happens. I mean, say that I bring it to the COVID Cabinet Committee in terms of this being an important priority, the way it seems to work in New Brunswick is that we wait and see if the federal government does something first. That is what happened to international students because it was thought that the federal government was going to do more for international students and then they did not. And then the New Brunswick government took the position that they would wait and let the federal government do it because it saves the provincial government money but then things do not happen like the debt support necessary for international students. So there does need to be a package and it could have a federal and provincial component to it.

The province did start off on the right foot with pre-CERB, which was not great for students, but it did provide for people who had lost their jobs. They put in place Bridge Funding before the federal government kicked in with their money and they did a poor job, as you know, at the end of the term with money there for students but it really was disappointing. The principle is that the province, when the federal government is not acting or is acting too slowly, needs to jump in to provide the support that is necessary. I have not seen the agenda for the Cabinet Committee meeting Wednesday but this is definitely something I will bring forward in terms of the need to start thinking about, if they have not, what kind of additional supports are going to be required for students and universities. I do not know but I suppose that the administrations are preparing something as well to bring forward to the government.

Question: Has the provincial government made any plans to fill in the gaps where international students were left behind by the federal government?

Mr. Coon: While they have not and I know that the Student Union has made a proposal on that, and it seems to have gotten stuck at PETL (Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour). It is something that needs to be a part of the overall discussion about what is next for students and universities. Right now, where the planning has been headed is the planning for the fall and the potential of a second wave, and right about now would be a good time to raise those particular issues. The Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training, and Labour is a member of the COVID Cabinet Committee, which is really important and people do not know that, so he is there and that's important. He did not know that STU had told people that they did not have to come to the university until I told him, which was interesting. So to the point, if he did not realize that STU had said you don't need to physically be on campus, well then



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suddenly that is going to create a whole lot of new needs; how are they going to be supported, right?

Question: Is there anything students can do to get that conversation going, and pushed through the door? As a union I know we did write letters, but can we be doing more to push that conversation?

Mr. Coon: One of the things I have seen on the committee is the important role that Deputy Ministers play. It is really important to build up that rapport and flow of information to the Deputy Ministers, and sometimes the Assistant Deputy Ministers, and not just the Minister so that you're working both ends. I say sometimes the Assistant Deputy Minister because depending on who is working those posts, you need to work with whoever is easiest to work with and who seems most supportive. If the Deputy Minister is that then that is great, but if the Assistant Deputy Minister seems more of an ally then you can concentrate more effort there. At those senior levels, it is really key that they are really tuned in to what you are trying to achieve, because the Minister will always turn to them and ask them what is going on.

Sarah: I wanted to say this for those that are listening but all of you are members of the New Brunswick Student Alliance, both STU and UNB are, and the four of us here that are members of the Students' Unions are your representatives on the NBSA Board. I wanted to mention that the Executive Director of the NBSA meets quite regularly with Minister Trevor Holder and the Deputy Minister as well, so we have that close communication already. With that being said, anything that you all want to see happen during the course of the year or you're really passionate about, it's so important for us all as students to come together and relay that information to the four of us or bring it to the NBSA Board directly because we work entirely off student input. While we're having these discussions here today, that's just something to think about in the back of your minds, because if you're passionate about something please bring it forward as those connections are already pre-established and we can definitely work on making that happen together.

Mr. Coon: Yeah, it is an important relationship that the NBSA and the Student Unions build with the folks that are at the decision-making level, both the political and the public service. It is those relationships that get built that smooth the way for proposals and demands that are brought forward. While UNB and STU are both in Fredericton South, I think it is important that if you are not living here, that students are in touch with their own MLAs for where their



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permanent address is, so that they're hearing from you as students to amplify the message that the Student Unions and the NBSA are bringing forward to the decision makers. One of the other things that does happen is a Minister will turn to their colleagues in cabinet or in their caucus, so the other MLAs can say "have you heard from anybody in your riding about this?", "have students been asking you about this in your riding?", that happens. If one person says, "yes I have", suddenly that elevates whatever the issue is the Student Unions or NBSA are bringing forward to another level. It seems like a simple yes from one MLA, it suddenly makes it jump up in the level of priority that is much greater than you would expect from a simple comment. It is a good strategy for students that live outside of Fredericton to be in touch with their own MLAs. I know that's kind of weird, I was never in touch with any MLA until I was one, so it's not something lots of people are used to doing, but that's what they're there for and they're expecting to hear from you. If they do not hear, then the assumption is that it's not an important issue to anyone. It does not have to be great, overwhelming numbers, just that they have heard from one or two students.

Question: I just wanted to throw out another plug for our students that we are also a part of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, which is our national representative. They function similar to the NBSA, except they advocate nation-wide. I wanted to bring up something that CASA is advocating for right now, which is looking for support for post-secondary students that do not fall within the specified age gap. The Canada Emergency Response Benefit and the Canada Student Service Grant have an age restriction, I think it goes up to 30 years old, however we know that there are students within our universities that are not within this age restriction. I think especially for the province of New Brunswick this can be a concern as we historically have wage concerns and I think for many individuals who come back to university to upgrade and looking for better quality of life, so I was just wondering if you had any thoughts on the scope that our provincial government might be able to advocate for in terms of supporting students' eligibility for something like this?

Mr. Coon: In terms of connection with the federal government on this, both the Minister and the Deputy Minister have regular calls with the Ministers across Canada and the federal Minister, so there is a regular discussion about issues especially among all the provinces. That is a logical place to raise that concern to get the federal government more engaged with that. I do not know in the Minister's overall mandate, because he has got post-secondary education, training overall, immigration and refugees, so I do not know where post-secondary fits in his



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order of priorities because it is not the only thing he has got. Something like that might be easier to generate a common front around an ask with the Minister to the department, because then it is very focused and very specific to a particular end. That might be something to try and organize a common front around. One of the things I would say here is never assume the Minister knows that much. I do not mean that in a negative way, but often there is a lot that Ministers do not know. The best assumption is always that they have not heard about this, they do not know the issue or the problem, and start from there. I think everyone assumes that they are elected, they are a Minister, they are masters of the universe in their world of post-secondary education and labour, but it is not really the case. There is a lot of demands on their time, and it depends on the Minister too – some really want to drill down into the weeds on all the details, and some are more at the 30,000-foot level. I think it is a good approach to just assume that if they are not particularly concerned about something, that it is not on the radar of the Minister, or sometimes even the staff.

Megan: At CASA they often say that we are the best at knowing student issues because we experience them firsthand, but that's a great point that you really have to assume that you are going to be educating those who are meant to help you in those situations. They might have been at school at one point, but it is definitely a very different time now, especially during COVID-19.

Mr. Coon: That's exactly right, and people do have that natural tendency to go back to when they were at university. That might have been decades ago, and how relevant is that really to the reality that all of you are facing?

Question: Do you know if the provincial government will put things in place to help students with accessibility needs, and help maneuver online learning?

Mr. Coon: No, I do not think they have thought about this, at least in the instance of post-secondary. Here is the interesting thing, I ran into the guy who is the technology lead for the Anglophone school district west. He has got 12 people working with him and they brought on more people *just* for Anglophone west. They have been thinking about all the stuff and it is amazing. He was telling me this and I was thinking holy can we rent you out and put you together with the Minister of PETL because really I do not feel like they are quite on the ball with this yet. It would be an interesting thing to look at what they are doing there and incorporate it into the ask to say look what is happening in one school district. They have



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flagged all these issues and are trying to address them, and it is not clear that that is what is happening in post-secondary. I made a mental note and said this is something that is going to need some attention, because it does not seem to be getting it at post-secondary. I hear about it every day because my wife is a professor at STU, so I hear about it from her perspective and all the needs of making sure students have a good educational experience this coming year.

Question: I'm a public-school teacher, but I see it from the perspective of new students attending university and the struggles that they're going to have with online learning, because as a new post-secondary learner I've seen that they struggle with online learning. They don't know how to use the technology, they don't know how to maneuver a course online, and they don't have good study skills or work ethic yet. I am afraid for these first year, post-secondary students that are coming up in this fall term. I am wondering what the post-secondary institutions have put in place for these students?

Mr. Coon: I share your concerns as well, especially for the first years for all the reasons you have said. It is a bit disturbing that institutions have not received any additional support to do anything more in a sense, so they are working with their existing resources. There is not more in place to ensure that this term works for everybody. I know lots of professors who are really working hard this summer, going through so much time to try and put something together for their courses. To do it right as you may know, is like 10 hours of work for 1 hour of online, if they are committed to this which many of them are. But they need resources to be effective at that too, and there is a little bit there, but there could be a whole lot more. On the provincial side, there has not been adequate thinking about that, and I do not know what kind of interaction administrations have been having with PETL over this. It is a big concern absolutely.

Question: What can non-Atlantic students expect in regard to the border and self-isolation?

Mr. Coon: Uncertainty is the rule of the day. As of now, they would be required to self isolate as they arrive. I know the premiere has been talking about removing that for other Canadians outside the Atlantic Canadian bubble sometime in the summer. Whether or not that happens for sure, I do not know. Given the surge in the United States, it has a lot of people worried, rightfully so. So, if that does not happen then it will require a 14-day isolation period. This would also apply to international students.



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Question: Given the current situation, where students were told fairly late whether or not they will be learning in person, does the provincial government plan on creating an option for students to leave their lease early like what was recently created for those that may be suffering from domestic abuse currently have the option for?

Mr. Coon: Both STUSU and UNBSU have submitted proposals around that and I brought it to the cabinet committee. The idea is that it would be written into the emergency order which is renewed every two weeks so students could get out of their leases. The discussion is now happening with Service New Brunswick since they are the ones responsible for the residential tenancy act. This should be coming back shortly to the table to hopefully be implemented.

Question: How could students see progress about this? Are there minutes?

Mr. Coon: It is a cabinet meeting so there are no minutes, but, if it is successful it will be part of a change to one of the orders in the 14-day renewal of the state of emergency. As of right now, this is all being operated under the state of emergency act as an order.

Question: Obviously COVID has been made the priority right now, however, are there any actions that the provincial government is taking to confront the environmental crisis we are facing right now?

Mr. Coon: Unfortunately, this does seem to have been pushed to the back burner right now. There are currently no initiatives coming forward that I know of right now. The initiatives that they had committed to early on seemed to have slowed down. One of the biggest initiatives was around plastics, and that has also slowed down. From what I know, the federal government will be coming forward soon with a fairly large funding program for green infrastructure. This will go to help buildings not just be better overall, but greener.

Question: Has the provincial government been looking at different loans or loan forgiveness programs for students that have not been able to find work this summer?



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Mr. Coon: I have not heard about that as being a consideration. It seems that the provincial government believes that federal funding is covering that. I would recommend students try to go for the CESB or CERB if they qualify for it to help as a starting point.

Question: I do not think [the money students have received from the federal government] is going to be enough to carry a lot of students through for their academic year. I wonder if the universities had reached out to their educators and are telling them to consider their cost of textbooks as well? I wonder if that is something they are reaching out to the universities and to the professors and telling them to be careful with what text they choose for that course because of the cost of it or even accessibility.

Mr. Coon: I have not heard any of that discussion at all, so I do not know. The experience with the response to the pandemic and the way things have been designed to have some who fall through the cracks, so there will be quite a few students who end up falling through the cracks. There is an assumption that there are students who worked through the school year and there is CERB (Canada Emergency Response Benefit) or the federal student grant, so they assume there is money there. As an MLA I hear all the time that there are people falling through the cracks and for one reason or another they did not fit in to those things or they were inadequate for students with children for example since their costs are much higher. No one seems to have considered that. It is a challenge, there is no question about it. When we get to September, I expect that a lot of people will be hearing from students who are falling through the cracks and are asking for some sort of help.

Question: It is a whole different ballpark and for those students with children, it's going to be difficult, because what are they going to be doing with those kids when they are trying to study.

Mr. Coon: People who were in university a long time ago and have not had any contact with it for many years have a certain picture of a university student, and that is who they are organizing things around. You know the population of the student is quite diverse from what it was some years back and it was probably even more diverse at that time than people remembered. So, there is an approach that naturally happens where we build the approach around the typical student. When it does not reflect reality, we get so many falling through the cracks. That just goes back to why it's so important that it should work both ways; the Minister



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and staff at PETL should be regularly reaching out to student unions and students alliances as well and to administrations themselves to be having an ongoing discussion about what the needs are, what are the worries, what are the challenges, what do we need to do to make this all work? And I do not know if much of that is happening.

It makes me think about the importance of the accessibility of professors because they are going to need to be more accessible now with online learning more than ever. And so, I mean, that is not a government thing but it has got to be built in in a way so students can easily know that they can reach their professors in a reasonable time and get good discussion going with whatever the issue or concern is, whether it is around the course or whatever students need to talk to their professors about.

Mr. Coon on student advocacy:

It just occurred to me: if government would create a support position of student advocate. In this context, it would be someone's full time work would be an advocate for the students between the student body and the faculty. That would be really interesting.

Question: Going back to indigenous advocacy, I know Mr. Coon you recently spoke about MLA Megan Mitton's bill for inclusion of indigenous language in our public-school system. I was wondering if you have given any thought to also including this in post-secondary education and that there be more inclusivity there?

Mr. Coon: I have not because it is a little tough. Universities are not wholly owned subsidiaries of the provincial government like public school systems. I am not quite sure how you would do that. In the public-school system, it is just a matter of amending the Education Act, but universities operate independently. It could be part of the MOUs with some universities who are working away at what they are calling indigenization, which is a terrible word in my opinion. Anyways, it would be a good question to raise at the committees when the universities in front of the legislative committee, to have that discussion too.

It is interesting looking at systemic racism and saying ok, looking at an institution part of society, what about post secondary education. How has this been examined. Looking at how it will happen, it is going to focus on the justice and police systems.



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Question: So after going through this whole pandemic, which we are still going through, it was demonstrated that health care improvements are needed, especially at the start when it seemed like we didn't have enough equipment or enough protective gear, things like just to keep hospitals safe, so does the government of New Brunswick have plans of improving health care system here in Fredericton at all?

Mr. Coon: Yes, there are plans, for short and long-term issues. Our hospitals are oversubscribed, they were not ready before the pandemic constantly at a 100% on average and often over that. There are a bunch of issues in that, including why are there so many people in the hospitals. Lack of a primary care system drives people to hospitals when they cannot easily access health care any other way than going to the ER. Then, the number of people who end up in hospitals [is greater] than there would be if we actually had a health care system that is focused on prevention and management of chronic conditions and so on whether it is physical or mental health issues. And we do not handle that effectively either. There are some things that are in the works to try to deal with some of that. Providing better access to health care and establishing better nurse practitioner clinics in the cities to redirect people who normally to the ER because they don't have a family doctor or clinic is one thing and there is work in place to establish the dedicated operating resources for hip and knee replacements so that whole process gets moved along much quicker and the waitlist is shorter, and surgeries happen more quickly. Fundamental reforms need to be made and you cannot turn things on a dime, but they cannot be put off, put off and put off.

Right now, the focus is on how to keep the hospital system operating with a second wave if it's bigger without standing down the rest of health care. This is a big issue that has been there a long time, and there has not been the political will to tackle it really because it has been a political football. So one of the things I proposed was to have a standing committee of the legislative assemble who would be charged with looking at health care reform in public, hearing from the public what their issues are, hearing from those working in the system, and hearing from those with solutions and then I would bring forward recommendations and have actions implemented in short order to address the shortcomings in the systems. Unfortunately, that did not go forward.

Question: The premier recently openly said that, if he feels it necessary, he would be willing to call an election. I was just curious, looking at the financial state of the province during this whole pandemic, what your stance is on an election being called at this point in time?



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Mr. Coon: I think it is the last thing he should be doing; calling an election during a state of emergency. People are frightened and fearful of what is going on and what might come. I think most people want to see us continue to work together to try and do our very best to keep people healthy, safe and secure and help support people in the wake of consequences in terms of their jobs or school. I do not think it would be well received, and there is no need for it. The experience of the COVID committee has proved the ability of all parties to work together and that should be able to carry through to the legislative assembly and the work there.

Mr. Coon's closing remarks:

Megan, thank you for making this possible tonight and for the students who joined tonight. I do not know what we will do in the fall. I mean I was at UNB and STU every other week last year at lunch. We will have to figure that one out. Not sure what the possibilities are but we will continue to be in touch with you guys. The rule today is uncertainty and that is difficult to live with because none of us have ever had to live in a world with so much uncertainty that we are facing right now. It affects so many aspects of our lives and thinking about the future now, not just tomorrow. This has brought everyone closer together. Let's keep doing that.