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Inquiry

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

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[Translation]

STATE OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Callbeck calling the attention of the Senate to the state of post-secondary education in Canada.—(*Honourable Senator Tardif*)

Hon. Claudette Tardif: Honourable senators, I am extremely pleased to speak today in this debate on Senator Callbeck's inquiry on the state of post-secondary education in Canada. Having been a student, professor, dean of Faculté Saint-Jean and Vice-President of the University of Alberta, I am delighted at the depth of the debate on post-secondary education in this chamber.

I must thank Senator Callbeck for drawing this most vital matter to our attention. Thanks are also due to all my other colleagues, Senators Moore, Kinsella, Atkins and Mercer, for their contributions on the importance and the problems of post-secondary education in Canada.

Today, I would like to revisit some of these issues in a more general way and then move on to focus more particularly on the problems particular to French-language universities outside Quebec.

[English]

What comes to my attention when I look back on the previous inquiries of our good senators is the diverse range of issues that arise when we speak about the state of post-secondary education in Canada. These issues include tuition costs and student finances, research funding, commercialization, participation and completion rates for the general population, participation and completion rates for Aboriginal peoples, the rural urban divide, regional concerns, fundraising and life-long learning. This does not even begin to cover the individual needs of different forms of post-secondary education, from universities and colleges to technical schools and centres for distance learning.

What I also see, honourable senators, is agreement by all in the Senate that these issues are important, if not critical, to the future social and economic prosperity of Canada. This is a most encouraging development, one that I believe is representative of a growing understanding by the Canadian population.

More and more of our citizenry are realizing the social and economic benefits of a post-secondary degree and are seeking to attend schools across the country. The challenge, then, for all levels of government is in providing, for those who desire it, a post-secondary education that is accessible, affordable and of high quality.

In his essay, "The Mission of the University," Professor George Fallis speaks of the four core missions of a modern research

university: teaching, research, community service and commercialization. Each of these components are critical because, as Fallis and so many others like him note, the modern economy is one that has transitioned from being resource-based into one that is driven by knowledge.

As far back as 1963, Clark Kerr wrote that:

The basic reality, for the university, is the widespread recognition that new knowledge is the most important factor in economic and social growth.

Today, writers like Dr. Richard Florida speak about the rise of the creative class, that is to say, those who are trained to excel in the knowledge-based economy and the economic and social value that this class has upon a city and a region.

As such, universities are one of the critical drivers in the success of a modern society and economy. Not only do universities train and draw in the talent necessary to the success of a region, but they also provide the technology that leads to modern innovations in areas such as health care, energy and agriculture.

• (1530)

Universities also promote the tolerance that is the basic requirement of a civil democratic society. If we look at the impact of the University of Alberta on Edmonton and the province of Alberta, we can see that that is indeed the case. The University of Alberta opened nearly 100 years ago in 1908. Today, the university receives over 35,000 students in more than 370 academic programs in 18 faculties. Nearly 50,000 alumni currently live in Edmonton, and over 194,000 live around the world.

Annually, University of Alberta graduates working in Edmonton spend some \$3.8 billion after taxes. There is over \$2.5 billion associated with the ripple effect of spending by the University of Alberta, its employees, students and visitors, which helps support roughly 50,000 jobs.

My point in all of this, honourable senators, is that this is only part of the effect of one university in one city in one province in Canada. It barely scratches the surface. Add in the other universities, colleges and technical institutes from every province and territory in this country, from British Columbia to Newfoundland, and we would then begin to see the true depth and scope of social and economic power. There is not a single aspect of our lives that is not bettered by post-secondary education, whether it is our health, environment, standard of living, education, social development, political understanding or cultural undertakings.

The good news is that provincial governments across the country, as well as the federal government, recognize the importance of post-secondary education in the lives of Canadians. We have seen, over the past year, major investments in post-secondary education in several provinces, and I note British Columbia and Ontario.

In my own province, Alberta, we have seen a significant increase in public support for post-secondary education, which has, in turn, led to an increase in public funding.

In April of 2005, the Government of Alberta committed to providing, over the next three years, a 30-per-cent overall funding increase for post-secondary education. The federal government continued its support of post-secondary education in this year's budget, with important dollars being placed towards scholarships, innovations in climate change, as well as research and development in Canadian universities. All these initiatives and investments must be recognized and acknowledged for what they are, significant contributions to the public good.

They are significant contributions to the public good because the success of Canada will be measured according to the successes of post-secondary education. Canada's future prosperity, as well as its place in the global community, is dependent upon its ability to properly transition itself into the knowledge-based economy. That transition can most easily be facilitated by post-secondary institutions. Not only will post secondary institutions allow Canada to be a global competitor, they will also provide to individual Canadians a better life. Canadians who receive a post-secondary education will, on average, lead healthier lives, make more money, be more engaged as citizens and have greater opportunities and choices than those who simply complete high school.

We must create, support, sustain and build our knowledge capital in the optimistic hope that by doing so, we will create of Canada a capital of knowledge, one that is the envy of the world.

Yet, many challenges face post-secondary education today. Although tuition increases across the country have not created an overall decline in attendees to Canada's major post-secondary institutions, we know youth from high-income families are twice as likely to attend university as youth from low-income families. That cost is the single largest reason given by those who choose not to attend post-secondary institutions.

We know that it is becoming more difficult to achieve the grades necessary to get into the limited spots that post-secondary institutions can provide. The average secondary school marks needed to gain entrance to a university in Canada have increased 10 percentage points over the last decade. This is increasingly burdensome on low-income students, as they are more likely to have missed out on various forms of support that tend to foster academic achievement.

We know that while provincial governments and the federal government are making significant contributions to research, development and the commercialization in Canada's post-secondary institutions, we must do more if we wish to maintain our economic and social status in the world, gain rather than drain the most talented minds and provide innovative and efficient solutions to pressing concerns such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, climate change and spiralling health care costs. If we are to find innovative solutions to modern problems, and if we wish to compete globally with countries such as the United States, India, China or the European Union, we must place a greater priority on research and development in this country.

[*Translation*]

We must also make use of this innovative thinking to solve the problems faced by French-language universities outside Quebec. In addition to facing the same challenges as their counterparts elsewhere in the country, these universities often face the additional challenges that come with being an institution in a minority setting.

Obstacles faced by these institutions were prioritized in the 2005-2010 action plan of the Association des universités de la francophonie canadienne.

Lack of students is a major problem for all French-language universities in a minority setting — and for good reason. Their recruitment pool is more limited than that of English-language institutions in the same locations.

Adequate funding will certainly help these universities increase their enrolment capacity by exploring the interesting possibilities available through long-distance learning, but, more importantly, by becoming the first choice of overseas and French-immersion students.

Support for student and professor mobility is something else institutions count on to increase their presence in the international francophonie.

French-language universities outside Quebec are just as concerned about increasing their potential enrolment as developing their research capacity. Again, universities in French-language minority settings are scarcely any better off, not necessarily because of language considerations, but because these institutions, except for the University of Ottawa, are small. These institutions are not known for having large research teams or always meeting the high criteria for getting the research budgets generously provided by the Government of Canada.

When he was the minister responsible for the Action Plan for Official Languages, Minister Dion maintained, and rightly so, that more needed to be known about official languages and official languages communities. This vital information should be provided by the researchers who, in his opinion, played a key role in implementing the action plan.

Mr. Dion's remarks are just as relevant today. Improving knowledge about minority communities and language policies and rights is vital and must be the responsibility of those most directly affected, that is, the institutions of these communities.

The vitality of post-secondary institutions in minority communities lies in broader recruitment, greater research capability, a greater openness to the world and effective use of new technologies. For many, myself included, the achievement of these objectives is dependent on the financial involvement of the federal government.

• (1540)

The reasons are twofold. In addition to their mandate to prepare the next generation to share — in French — in the country's future prosperity, these universities have a responsibility to help promote French and to revitalize francophone communities.

Government of Canada support has always been the cornerstone of the creation and development of the French-language college and university networks.

French-language post-secondary institutions expect a lot from the federal government, especially since it has indicated its determination to take further action in connection with access to education with the Action Plan for Official Languages.

In her most recent report, the Commissioner of Official Languages reminds us, however, that the action plan “is not yet off the ground, particularly with respect to education and teaching.”

It is vital that we take immediate action and give the universities direct access to the tools they need. Although education is a provincial responsibility, the federal government can use its spending power to address the needs of universities, without necessarily going through the provinces. Numerous precedents related to the official languages support this view. As Mr. Yves Fontaine, president of the Université de Moncton and president of the Association des universités de la francophonie canadienne mentioned when he appeared before the Standing Committee on Official Languages, the federal government already directly supports universities through the Canadian Foundation for Innovation, the Atlantic Innovation Fund and even ACOA.

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senator, I am sorry but your time has expired. Do the honourable senators agree to grant leave for an additional five minutes?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator Tardif: The funds directly transferred from Health Canada to francophone communities and universities in order to improve health care programs are additional proof that it is possible for the federal government to conclude agreements directly with universities in a minority setting in order to facilitate access and reinforce their research capacity.

Honourable senators, the examples provided to date on the multiple facets of post-secondary education in Canada encourage action. Our ability as a nation to play a leading role in the new knowledge-based economy depends on the attention we pay to the diagnosis we have made here, which others outside this chamber support.

We cannot allow ourselves to sit idly by. I call upon the various levels of government to invest in our future and the welfare of our societies by making post-secondary education a national priority and by giving our post-secondary institutions the means to face these many challenges and fulfill their noble mission.
