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## STATE OF LITERACY

### Inquiry—Debate Continued

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Wednesday, November 8, 2006

## THE SENATE

Wednesday, November 8, 2006

[Translation]

### STATE OF LITERACY

#### INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Fairbairn, P.C., calling the attention of the Senate to the State of Literacy in Canada, which will give every Senator in this Chamber the opportunity to speak out on an issue in our country that is often forgotten.—(Honourable Senator Robichaud, P.C.)

**Hon. Claudette Tardif:** Honourable senators, I rise today to address Senator Fairbairn's inquiry into the state of literacy in Canada. Speaking as a relatively new member of the Senate and as something of a novice when it comes to the measures and nuances associated with this government policy issue, I have found the debate and discussion during the question period and orders of the day over the past six weeks extremely enlightening. I would like to thank Senator Fairbairn and many other senators for having awakened and maintained interest in this public issue.

[English]

It is my belief, honourable senators, that most Canadians take it for granted that we are a literate nation. If you were to ask the average Canadian about the definition of literacy, I am certain most would respond with the same answer: The ability to read a book.

We have good elementary and secondary schools, our post-secondary education system and institutions continue to graduate students at a record pace, and we are prosperous. As such, many would not believe it if they were told that 9 million people in this country between the ages of 16 and 65 — and 12 million, if you include those over 65 — are below the internationally accepted threshold for coping with the increasing skill demands of a knowledge society. Nor would they believe that the number is even greater for those failing to meet the desired threshold in numeracy at around 55 per cent of the Canadian population. They would not believe it, yet that is the case.

The fact is, our conception of what literacy means has fallen far behind what being literate actually entails. It is not enough now to know how to read a book and operate some basic machinery. In a day and age where technology and knowledge accelerates at such a rapid pace, the essential skills required to function and prosper continually shift and transform.

Can an individual program their VCR or DVD? Can they type up a resume on the computer? Can they surf the Internet for a job? Can they problem-solve in situations where no obvious solution exists? These are all skills, amongst others, that are now essential in our knowledge-based society. One cannot exist without them and hope to lead a happy, healthy, successful life.

Robert Yagelski's book, *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*, says that literacy is a matter of individual empowerment in the way it can enable one to negotiate the complexities of life.

The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey measured proficiencies in four different domains: prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem-solving. An individual's proficiency was then ranked on a scale of one to five, with one being the lowest and five the highest. It is commonly accepted that level three is the desired threshold for those living in a knowledge-based society such as the one that exists in Canada. It is below this level, as I stated earlier, where 48 per cent of our citizens over the age of 16 exist today in prose literacy, and 55 per cent of our population exists in numeracy, which is basic math.

[Translation]

It is essential that people who have trouble with reading, writing and math have access to services that can help them improve their skills so they can make a greater contribution to the country's economic development.

In many cases, such as in the oil industry, the ability to read new safety information is essential. Imagine working in a Fort McMurray oil field and being unable to read posted safety information. This could endanger your personal safety or, worse yet, your life and the lives of others.

[English]

In my home province of Alberta, honourable senators, efforts are being made to address this deficiency head-on. Despite having one of the more literate provinces in the country, there are still problems.

According to a recent Literacy Alberta document, 40 per cent of adult Albertans and 35 per cent of working age Albertans do not have the literacy skills necessary to reach their own potential in our increasingly knowledge-based economy. Moreover, 44 per cent do not have the numeracy — basic math — skills needed, and almost 50 per cent have lower-level problem-solving skills. This is all augmented by the fact that 25 per cent of Alberta's students do not complete high school within five years and that 90 per cent of those students who do not get a high school education have low-level problem-solving skills. In the key 16 to 25 demographic, the future of the province of Alberta, 36 per cent have literacy skills below level three.

Why is this important, honourable senators? Why are these numbers and this situation so unsatisfactory? This situation is unsatisfactory to the people of Alberta because these percentages limit the social and economic potential of our citizens. It is unsatisfactory because these percentages lead to stagnation and eventually a decline in our way of life.

Literacy Alberta has created wonderful fact sheets about many of the key areas affected by low levels of literacy. They include work, family, health, employment, poverty, seniors, people with disabilities, citizenship and justice. They are excellent documents as they provide us with insight into the full impact that illiteracy or literacy have upon a society. The numbers are simply staggering. A 1 per cent increase in average literacy rates would result in a 1.5 per cent permanent increase in GDP. In Alberta alone, that is a permanent increase in GDP of \$3 billion. Almost 20 years ago, with literacy rates similar to what they are now, the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy estimated low literacy annually cost businesses \$1.6 billion in lost time due to workplace accidents and \$2.5 billion in productivity. By 2020, it is estimated that Canada will have a shortage of 1 million skilled workers — that is to say, short 1 million workers who are literate enough to fulfil basic job requirements.

These are the realities that we face, honourable senators, and I can provide many more. The Government of Alberta has undertaken to address the issue of literacy. Beginning in January 2005, the Minister of Advanced Education began a series of consultations that would re-evaluate Alberta's current advanced education system. As a part of that process, a member of Alberta's literacy committee was invited to sit on the A Learning Alberta Steering Committee, and one of the subcommittees reporting to the larger steering committees would focus its work on foundational learning and diversity.

The A Learning Alberta Steering Committee recognized that literacy is critical to the desired achievements of Alberta's post-secondary system and therefore critical to Alberta's future productivity and prosperity. I would go so far as to suggest that the steering committee also recognized that we do not have a labour shortage in our province, but a skills shortage.

Just as the Government of Alberta has recognized that literacy has a tremendous impact upon the productivity and prosperity of the province, so too should the Government of Canada recognize the impact it has upon the productivity and prosperity of the nation. It is therefore extremely disappointing to see these \$17.7 million in cuts to literacy recently announced by the federal government.

In May of 2006, Toronto Dominion Economics released a special report on the 2006 federal budget. Within that report, tied to the government's commitment to "promote a more competitive, productive Canada for the benefit of all Canadians," was a section on literacy. The report states, "public and private spending toward the improvement of literacy skills is justified by several studies, which suggest that literacy matters for economic well-being." The report then goes on to highlight some of the findings I have already iterated here today and which have been previously stated in this chamber.

[*Translation*]

For francophones across the country, the federal government's budgetary cuts to the literacy program had a major impact on these communities.

According to the Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français, the impact of the federal government's cuts will be quite different from one province to the next. In Ontario, the Coalition francophone pour l'alphabétisation lost almost two thirds of its budget.

In New Brunswick, the federation tells me that almost the entire budget of the Fédération de l'alphabétisation au Nouveau Brunswick was cut.

In Alberta, Eduk-Alberta, an agency that helps the francophone community in particular, had in recent years developed an approach based on family literacy, which relied on cooperation and an exchange of expertise with Bow Valley College and the Centre for Family Literacy adapted to the needs of francophones. The announced cuts eliminate the possibility of any further such exchange of expertise in the future.

In British Columbia, a literacy approach more specifically geared to the needs of exogamous couples had been developed and shared with other provinces. The announced cuts eliminate the possibility of any further such sharing of expertise with the other provinces and francophone communities in the future.

The federal government's cuts also make it impossible for federal literacy agencies to work with the provinces. If the agencies had been consulted or warned, they could have diversified their sources of funding and turned to the provincial governments to make up the shortfall.

[*English*]

Honourable senators, federal spending on literacy must not be construed as creating waste or "overlap." The Leader of the Government in the Senate has stated on many occasions that the cuts were made because the funding overlapped with funding from other jurisdictions. The word "overlap" means extraneous. How can it be extraneous or unnecessary if it is causing programs to close and people to lose their jobs?

Literacy must be articulated for what it truly is — a short-term investment that will allow us to prosper and save in the long-term. A 1 per cent increase in average literacy rates across this country would result in an \$18 billion permanent increase in GDP. Furthermore, as a more literate population will be richer, healthier, safer, and more just, I cannot adhere to the notion that it is beyond the scope of federal responsibility. In reality, an increase in federal literacy funding is likely to result in a decrease in spending in other areas of federal jurisdiction.

I support Senator Segal's assertion that literacy should be treated as a "joint federal-provincial-private sector undertaking," as well as his call for a federal-provincial summit on the state of literacy in Canada. The first is a recognition that literacy is a national issue that must be faced by all parties and in all sectors, and the second is a tangible goal that can be acted upon and implemented.

I support the commitment of the A Learning Alberta Steering Committee to have 90 per cent of its citizen's score in the upper tiers of international adult literacy and believe it is a level we should seek to attain in Canada from Vancouver Island to Labrador. It is a stretch-goal that should be combined with short-term performance targets that are more easily attained, but I believe it is an aspiration that can be used to inspire our citizens and motivate our governments and businesses.

Lastly, I would suggest that we participate, honourable senators, in the Literacy Action Day events tomorrow, November 9, as Senator Fairbairn has requested. It is a unique opportunity at this time when the issue is at the forefront of our minds to hear from the men and women who spend their days fighting to educate some of our most disadvantaged and disenfranchised citizens.

Thank you again to Senator Fairbairn for being such a relentless advocate of increased literacy in our nation and to all who have helped raise the level of dialogue in conversation on this most critical of public policy issues.

**Hon. Wilfred P. Moore:** Honourable senators, it is my pleasure today to speak to the inquiry initiated by Senator Fairbairn into the recent cuts to literacy programming by Canada's current government. It is troubling, to say the least, that one of the wealthiest nations on this planet might see fit to choose such a target for spending cuts.

First, let me draw the attention of this chamber to the dedication Senator Fairbairn has displayed to this most worthy of causes. Helping those who cannot read and write has been her passion for many years. In 1987, Senator Fairbairn initiated a national debate on literacy in this chamber. Upon her appointment as Leader of the Government in the Senate in 1993, Senator Fairbairn was also made Minister with Special Responsibility for Literacy. In 1997, she was named Special Advisor on Literacy to the Minister of Human Resources Development Canada. That is a long way of saying that Senator Fairbairn knows of what she speaks when it comes to literacy in Canada.

We have heard honourable senators from across this country discuss the state of literacy in their respective provinces. Today I would like to speak about Nova Scotia.

The Department of Education in Nova Scotia, through the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning, delivers literacy programming through four initiatives.

**Community Learning Networks:** Thirty of these networks exist across the province and deliver essential skills and training to individuals. These networks include the Antigonish County Learning Association and the Halifax Learning Community Network.

**Nova Scotia Community Colleges:** There are 12 campuses which deliver higher level adult education.

**Adult High Schools:** There are 17 of these high schools;

**Université Sainte-Anne:** It administers the delivery of French language training at six sites.

That provincial department is taking a lead role in literacy issues. That is not to say there is no room for a federal presence.

We have heard of many studies over the past few days that point out the necessity of government-funded literacy programs. The OECD, the Conference Board of Canada and the C.D. Howe Institute, among others, agree that Canada, through literacy investment, will reap the economic benefits that these better educated workers will produce for our knowledge-based economy. Like the environment and post-secondary education, every report produced nationally and internationally promotes increased investment in literacy, certainly not the cutting of funding.

I would like to cite a report prepared by the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, APEC, which looked into literacy issues in Atlantic Canada in March 2006. Based on the 2005 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, the APEC report reveals that the average proficiency scores in Nova Scotia are at the national average. However, for every one adult equipped to compete in the knowledge-based economy, there is another who, for literacy reasons, is not equipped to do the same.

That survey looked at literacy in four areas, including prose literacy, which is the ability to use and understand information from things such as medicine labels or instruction manuals; and document literacy, which refers to the ability to comprehend simple things such as a bus schedule. Numeracy and problem solving were also included as criteria.

The grading is done in levels one through five, with a minimum of three required to deal with the demands of today's information economy. In Atlantic Canada, the survey demonstrated that 76 per cent of those with level four or five document proficiency were employed, while only 46 of those at the lowest level were employed.

As all literacy studies show, those with higher proficiencies also earned more. One-half of Atlantic Canadians with low-level document proficiency had earnings of less than \$20,000 per year and were also more likely to require government assistance.

Nova Scotia's population is below the national average — 42 per cent — of the proportion of adults with lower-level prose literacy proficiency; it is at 38 per cent. One way to improve this level is to at least obtain the level of high school graduate.

That brings us to an organization called Literacy Nova Scotia. Literacy Nova Scotia is described as the "premiere professional voice for literacy in Nova Scotia." The mission of Literacy Nova Scotia is to ensure that "every Nova Scotian has access to quality literacy education." Working with the provincial Department of Education, Literacy Nova Scotia has played a leadership role in my province through the provision of services to practitioners,

both professional and volunteer, who deliver the programs to the 5,000 adults taking part in literacy programs. According to Literacy Nova Scotia, it is this training and professional development that results in a successful adult literacy program.

Literacy Nova Scotia was informed by Human Resources and Social Development Canada that it was included in the funding cuts announced by our current government. What are the consequences of those cuts for my province? They include the loss of the following: direct skill enhancement for learners through 12 workshops held across Nova Scotia; professional development offered by experts in the field of adult literacy for literacy practitioners — instructors and tutors — through regional workshops; action research training workshops for practitioners through 12 regional workshops and two professional conferences; four provincial conferences for coordinators of community based programs comprised of 30 networks, to ensure consistent quality of service to the approximately 2,500 adult learners in those programs; 12 workshops on inclusion techniques and cultural sensitivity; a provincial conference to discuss the learning communities concept to integrate literacy into all aspects of community development; and 12 regional workshops providing support to non-profit literacy organizations.

Furthermore, in a letter addressed to Mr. Gerald Keddy, Conservative member of the other place for South Shore—St. Margaret's, the board of directors of the Queens County Learning Network expressed their deep concerns over the cuts to literacy programs. According to the board:

...most of us consider LNS to be our “umbrella” organization that holds us together and puts us in touch with other community based programs in other areas of the province to help us with a common concern.

If organizations such as this express such concerns over these cuts, it begs this question: Was anyone consulted in the literacy community before these cuts were made? Minister Finley was asked that very question in the other place and she could not name one group that was consulted.

After informing Literacy Nova Scotia that their funding would be cut, the same government then turned around and informed Literacy Nova Scotia they would actually have enough funds approved to remain open until August of next year. Then what? Will these funding cuts be restored on a yearly basis? There is much confusion here, and yet this government continues to boast of the \$81 million in funding over two years that remains after the cuts.

Literacy Nova Scotia was also informed that all programming funded in the future would have to be “national in scope.” What does this mean? What could be more national in scope than adult literacy, a cause that includes persons of every race, culture and gender?

What is the plan in allocating the \$41 million for this year? What exactly is the national strategy being touted by this government?

Literacy Nova Scotia must have its funding restored, as should the rest of the similar organizations across our country. Not to do so is a sorry erosion of our social fabric.

For a mere \$17.7 million investment in restored funding to literacy programs across Canada — and, specifically, the \$345,028 taken from Nova Scotia — Literacy Nova Scotia can get back to fulfilling its leadership mission in preventing my province from being marginalized in an economic environment that places an increased premium on knowledge, skills and adaptability.

On motion of Senator Robichaud, debate adjourned.

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