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POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Inquiry—Debate Continued

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, May 13, 2008

THE SENATE

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POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

[*Translation*]

On the Order:

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

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition):
Honourable senators, I am pleased to rise today to highlight, once again, the importance of post-secondary education to Canadian society. Senators Hubley, Callbeck, Poy and Cowan have already addressed this matter with eloquence and I am happy to add my voice in support of their excellent remarks.

Honourable senators, last month I celebrated the third anniversary of my appointment to this upper chamber. In June 2005, on the occasion of my first inquiry on the state of post-secondary education in Canada, I stated, and I quote:

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.

Furthermore, in June 2006, I reiterated my commitment by making an inquiry into this matter that is vital to current and future generations. I would like to thank Senator Hubley for putting forward an inquiry this year and thereby showing that this is a matter of interest to a large number of senators.

Honourable senators, since 2005 many things have changed throughout the country and many others have not. Fortunately, even more Canadians are participating in and benefiting from the many advantages of post-secondary education.

[*English*]

On March 4, 2008, Statistics Canada released the census data from 2006 on educational attainment rates in Canada. I wish to share with honourable senators some of the key findings of the census.

Sixty per cent of Canadians between the ages of 25 and 64 have completed some form of post-secondary education.

The number of university graduates has risen 24 per cent since 2001, increasing to 23 per cent of the total population.

Of those immigrants who have come to Canada between 2001 and 2006, 51 per cent have a university degree. Eight per cent of the Aboriginal population aged 25 to 64 has a university degree compared with 6 per cent in 2001.

These findings are all positive, honourable senators, and speak to our growing understanding of the value of a post-secondary education. Yet, within that same 2006 census, there is a significant amount of sobering data.

For example, Canada ranks sixth in the OECD in terms of the proportion of the population with a university degree, behind countries such as Norway, the U.S. and Australia.

Thirty-three per cent of women between the ages of 25 and 34 have a university degree. Only 25 per cent of men between those ages have a university degree.

Eleven per cent of all Canadians aged between 25 and 34 still have less than a high school diploma.

Although the number of Aboriginals obtaining a university degree has grown, the figure has not kept pace with the growth in the general population. The university participation gap between Aboriginal students and the general population is now at 15 per cent compared to 14 per cent in 2001.

Thirty-four per cent of Aboriginals between the ages of 25 and 64 have failed to complete high school.

Twenty-six per cent of Canadians between the ages of 25 and 64 living in an urban area have a university degree compared to only 11 per cent of those living in rural areas.

There is more. In the past seven months, the presidents of three of Canada's largest and most prestigious universities have all publicly proclaimed the need for greater public and private investment in post-secondary education.

President Indira Samarasekera of the University of Alberta referencing the Canadian figures stated that:

... faculty members have not kept pace with enrolment growth . . .

She continued:

We now have 2,000 more faculty than we had in 1992, but we also have 222,000 more students.

President Stephen Toope of the University of British Columbia has noted that:

. . . when our brilliant researchers attract federal funding for their research, there is a modest top-up to universities to sponsor the overhead costs of supporting those researchers. That top-up is still too small; it still doesn't recognize the full costs of research. Even worse, however, the more successful a university is in attracting research funding, the lower the rate of the overhead top-up. We punish extraordinary accomplishment.

President David Naylor of the University of Toronto has pointed out that:

... in advanced or graduate education, we clearly underperform. The Conference Board study of 17 OECD nations found that only Italy awarded fewer Ph.D. degrees per capita than Canada. Compared to the United States, Canada awards a third fewer doctoral degrees and half as many master's degrees per capita.

He also noted that:

... twenty years ago, Canadian universities received \$2000 per student more from government than their U.S. peers. Today they receive on average \$5000 less.

That is but a sample of the deficiencies in Canadian post-secondary education policy illustrated by these presidents. Other bodies have outlined more. *Nature Magazine*, one of the world's most reputable and renowned journals, recently criticized Canada's current government for its "dismal" track record and "manifest disregard for science."

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada has noted that in Canada:

... the institutional cost of supporting research. . . funded through the Indirect Costs Program, are estimated to be at a minimum 40 per cent of the total direct costs of research.

The federal government is currently reimbursing at an overall rate of approximately 25 per cent.

The Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation has stated that:

... in 2006, 59 per cent of undergraduate university students graduated with debt resulting either from a government student loan or borrowing of another type. They owed an average of \$24,047.

These are some of the significant problems facing our students, our post-secondary institutions and our country. These are real problems related to: university participation rates, graduate student participation rates, gender inequalities, geographical inequalities, Aboriginal participation and completion rates, student loans, student debt, faculty growth, research development and innovation.

Each of these problems matters and must be addressed because we live in a time in history when the world's most important resource lies not on the side of a mountain or under a pile of sand, but within the mysterious confines of the human mind. We are in the midst of what economist Richard Florida calls "the creative era" — an era where knowledge is not just king, it is everything.

The social and economic well-being of our nation depends on our ability to transform ideas into technologies and innovations. To neglect the institutions that foster and incubate those ideas — universities and colleges — is to invite disaster.

Much has changed and much has stayed the same. Sadly, three years after my appointment to the Senate, one thing that remains the case is that Canadian legislatures have failed to make post-secondary education a public policy priority, meaning that an agenda of accessible, affordable and high quality education, an agenda that our citizens need and demand, is being advanced at a dilatory pace.

[Translation]

Honourable senators, that does not mean that there has been no progress or change in the field of post-secondary education. On the contrary, changes are being made, but we should be concerned about the speed and diligence with which we are tackling this issue, or to put it more accurately, the lack of speed and diligence with which we are tackling this issue.

Canadian governments have made progress in post-secondary education largely by investing time and resources, but the action taken does not reflect the promises made by these governments, the needs of students and post-secondary institutions or developments occurring simultaneously around the world.

As legislators, we are progressing much too slowly on the issue of post-secondary education, and we do not have a common set of goals, with the result that we are not giving Canadians what they want.

Last week, Senators Cowan and Meighen spoke about the need to find solutions to the problems of post-secondary education in Canada. I can only agree. The time for solutions is now. I do not think the solutions are out of reach. It is not the lack of solutions that is preventing rapid progress in this area. It is the lack of political will.

We can implement some of these solutions ourselves. However, many require the support of the provinces, post-secondary institutions and the private sector.

I will conclude by reiterating that I would like to see a national agreement on post-secondary education. As I said in 2005 and 2006, the time has come for legislators across the country to invest in our future and in the welfare of our society by making post-secondary education a national priority.

I add my support to Senator Callbeck's motion calling on the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology to examine and report on the accessibility of post-secondary education in Canada. I believe that such a report will contribute to finding solutions and will play an important role in what I feel should be our ultimate goal: to make Canada an international centre for knowledge.

On motion of Senator Andreychuk, debate adjourned.