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SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

**Motion for Adoption of Address in Reply—
Debate Continued**

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, February 24, 2009

THE SENATE

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[*Translation*]

SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

MOTION FOR ADOPTION OF ADDRESS IN REPLY—
DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the motion of the Honourable Senator Fortin-Duplessis, seconded by the Honourable Senator Gerstein:

That the following Address be presented to Her Excellency the Governor General of Canada:

To Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, Chancellor and Principal Companion of the Order of Canada, Chancellor and Commander of the Order of Military Merit, Chancellor and Commander of the Order of Merit of the Police Forces, Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada.

MAY IT PLEASE YOUR EXCELLENCY:

We, Her Majesty's most loyal and dutiful subjects, the Senate of Canada in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Excellency for the gracious Speech which Your Excellency has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, I rise today to take part in the debate on the Speech from the Throne and Budget 2009.

Canadians are looking to us to help them weather the effects of this tumultuous period of tremendous uncertainty. We are facing serious economic problems, many of which were created by the government.

I have a number of concerns about where this government plans to take Canadian public policy. Unfortunately, because of time constraints, I will have to focus on just a few of those concerns.

[*English*]

I will begin with a matter that is very close to me personally, namely education. The last Parliament saw several inquiries in this chamber into the state of post-secondary education in this country. We are all here, aware of the difficult financial constraints affecting post-secondary education in our country.

The Council of Ministers of Education, an organization that brings together ministers of education from all provinces and territories across Canada, said in March 2007 that post-secondary education is at "a critical juncture." We are all familiar with the statistics on the growing burden of debt that students are forced to carry in order to pursue post-secondary education. Indeed, Senator Goldstein spoke eloquently about this on February 5 when moving second reading of his bill to help those students for whom the burden becomes overwhelming.

We do not yet know the full impact of the economic crisis on our post-secondary education institutions. No one is suggesting that the crisis is over or that we have hit bottom yet. However, a few things have already become clear.

Canadian universities have lost hundreds of millions of dollars from their endowment funds because of the stock market meltdown. These losses have been compounded by the reluctance of donors to donate because the donors themselves have suffered terrible losses. For instance, the University of Alberta — my alma mater — had to increase tuition fees by 4.1 per cent and residence rates by 8 per cent this year as the endowments and interest accounts were damaged by the crippling economy. These latest increases unfortunately come on top of residence bills and rates that have increased nearly 30 per cent in the last three years.

The results of these devastating losses in endowment funds may well be cuts to student aid, scholarships and funding for programs, leaving students in the dire position of having to pay more for their education and livelihoods, with less funding.

• (1620)

[*Translation*]

How are students supposed to pay for the post-secondary education they need when scholarships and loans are disappearing before our very eyes? The budget does not do enough in terms of student loans, student debt and student jobs. According to statistics compiled by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the university sector is a \$26 billion business in Canada, up greatly from \$16 billion in 2001.

Universities serve over 1.5 million full-time, part-time and continuing education students and employ nearly 150,000 teaching and support staff.

[*English*]

According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada:

The university sector is larger than the pulp and paper industry, the oil and gas extraction industry, the utilities sector, the combined arts, entertainment and recreation industries and such prominent manufacturing industries as aerospace, motor vehicle, and plastic products.

Honourable senators, more than one third of research conducted in Canada takes place at Canadian universities. In other words, this is a critical sector, fundamental to maintaining and building the Canada we all want — a Canada that is at the forefront of innovation, creativity and productivity in the world.

Let me quote someone who is quite well known, especially to the honourable senators opposite. Preston Manning recently said that governments need to be reminded that post-secondary education is even more important in tough economic times.

Speaking at the recent fall convocation at the University of Alberta, he said:

It was Premier Aberhart, then also Minister of Education, who went to the wall for supporting higher education, as he put it, “No matter what.” He threatened to dissolve the legislature if the financial appropriation for higher education was not approved, arguing that a better educated populace was essential to the future economic recovery and prosperity, and not an option to be abandoned just because times were tough.

Yet, honourable senators, post-secondary education is not mentioned once in the entire Speech from the Throne. Perhaps this was due to its brevity. Nor was it mentioned in the Speech from the Throne from the last session.

While the allocation of \$2 billion in infrastructure spending for universities and colleges is worthy of praise, this sum is for bricks and mortar, not to increase access to post-secondary education or reduce student debt.

The budget indicates no increased funding for three major research councils: the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. They are all involved in cutting-edge research and development. If we do not invest adequately in research and development now, not only will we lose our competitiveness on the world scene, but our research and development field will cripple as much as our economy is crippled now.

The Polar Environment Atmospheric Research Laboratory in Nunavut, known as PEARL, is seeing its two key sources of federal money dry up despite this government’s stated commitment to Arctic science. That is \$200,000 a year in operating funds from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada ending on March 31, and the final instalment of a \$5.5 million five-year grant from the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences whose funding was not renewed.

The government did announce money to maintain and upgrade existing Arctic research stations in the amount of \$85 million, to be precise. However, that \$85 million cannot be used to pay for operating costs or science. What good is a renovated lab when there are no funds to pay for the research, power, experiments and communications that are supposed to occur in the lab?

Honourable senators, the same applies to the Drought Research Initiative, a project funded by the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences and which aims at preparing for the country’s next water crisis. The last drought, from 1999 to 2004, cost an estimated \$6 billion — not million — and 41,000 jobs. Are we ready to spend billions of dollars on the next water crisis which could be prevented with much lower cost projects such as the Drought Research Initiative?

The Canadian Association of University Teachers warned us recently that “scientific research in Canada is being undermined through underfunding and by attempts to specify what scientists study.” Indeed, the government has placed a condition on temporary funding increases for graduate studies in the arts and social sciences in Budget 2009. While NSRC, the science wing, and CIHR, the health wing, receive about 80 per cent of these

temporary funds, SSHRC, the main funding body for graduate studies in arts, humanity and social sciences receive the remainder — a mere 20 per cent. That might be understandable given the higher cost of research in science and health. However, the additional SSHRC funding is to be made available only for “business-related degrees,” a directive that is highly unusual for any government to give.

Honourable senators, times are dreadful when our scientists and our graduate students are being undermined. As I stated before in an inquiry on post-secondary education last year, 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.

Honourable senators, I would like to reiterate that the social and economic well-being of our nation depends on our ability to transform ideas into knowledge, technologies and innovations. To neglect the institutions that foster and incubate these ideas — universities, colleges, research centres and labs — is to invite disaster.

On another subject, as honourable senators may know, questions dealing with official languages, linguistic duality and official language minority communities are also very dear to my heart. There was no discussion of official languages anywhere in the Speech from the Throne of each of the last two parliamentary sessions. The Speech from the Throne for the Second Session of the Fortieth Parliament was absolutely devoid of any reference whatsoever to any plan to support, resource and advance Canada’s official languages. There is clearly a lack of leadership with regard to the defence and promotion of official languages with this government.

[*Translation*]

Like so many honourable senators here today, I am an ardent defender of our commitment to Canada’s official languages. However, I am sorry to say that our commitment does not appear to match that of the government. During the last session my colleague, the honourable Senator Chaput, gave an eloquent speech in which she outlined the needs of francophone minority communities, as well as the government’s duty to respect and commit itself to those communities.

Some honourable senators will remember the extraordinary statement made by our Commissioner of Official Languages in May 2008 when he released the annual report, dated May 29, 2008, and I quote:

The government continues to support Canada’s linguistic duality in principle; however, this support has not led to a global vision in terms of government policies and the public service.

This lack of leadership has resulted in a plateau being reached and, in some cases, a deterioration in the application of the official languages policy. I have noted that, yet again this year, very little progress has been made in several areas of activity. . . . A clear vision and strong leadership are nevertheless necessary if federal institutions are to meet some of the challenges related to official languages.

• (1630)

The federal budget, for instance, makes absolutely no mention of the Roadmap for Linguistic Duality. Although \$1.1 billion over five years was announced in June 2008, when the Roadmap was released, we have yet to see any of those funds distributed to help the development of minority language communities. The implementation of the Roadmap, the application of Part VII of the Official Languages Act and the promotion of minority language communities are unfortunately all abstract notions at this point.

[English]

Perhaps we should not be surprised in view of how this government deals with other areas in our society. In this budget, Minister Flaherty announced that his government intends to address the “lengthy, costly and adversarial process” that is the “existing complaint-based pay equity regime” so that “It will ensure that the employer and bargaining agents are jointly responsible and accountable for negotiating salaries that are fair and equitable to all employees.”

Honourable senators, pay equity is an issue of wage discrimination and of voicing one’s opinion. By making the employee responsible and accountable for negotiating salaries that are fair and equitable, the government closes its eyes to the reality that over half the population have not learned to negotiate a salary; over half the population do not even know that a salary can be negotiated; and over half the population might be afraid of discussing a salary for fear of being fired.

The Hon. the Speaker: The honourable senator’s time has expired.

Senator Tardif: I seek permission for five more minutes.

Senator Comeau: Yes.

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator Tardif: Holding the employee responsible does not protect the employee’s right to a fair and equitable salary.

Another important topic stirs much controversy in the government’s budget: the issue of Employment Insurance. As Senator Mitchell reminded us during Question Period a few weeks ago, women who lose their jobs in Canada are about half as likely to receive regular Employment Insurance benefits as men who lose their jobs. This comparison is particularly startling when it comes to single mothers.

Honourable senators, I find it most regrettable and appalling that the government did not take advantage of the new budget to improve EI accessibility criteria to facilitate women’s struggles with Employment Insurance and to offer over half the population a flexible means to obtain EI benefits. Women’s work and salaries are not only the backbone of our economy but also, increasingly, the bread and butter of Canadian families. Women’s unemployment in this day and age is to be taken seriously and not as a second-class-citizen issue as reflected in the current budget.

[Translation]

The Speech from the Throne was also notable for its silence on child care. Any parent can tell you that a working parent needs access to affordable, quality child care. A recent Environics poll revealed that 83 per cent of Canadians surveyed believe that governments have an important role to play in supporting parents by addressing parents’ child care needs. The same poll indicated that the lack of affordable care is an important issue for 77 per cent of Canadians.

The Speech from the Throne is silent on this matter and on the government’s paltry proposal of the last session to increase the Universal Child Care Benefit, certainly a welcome financial measure but one that does not take the place of real child care.

[English]

Honourable senators, Canadians are facing grave challenges. They look to their government to provide an honest, thoughtful and serious plan to steer the nation through these turbulent times. We need leadership; we need innovation; we need vision. Our fellow Canadians deserve nothing less.