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Training and Retention of Skilled Workforce

Questions by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

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THE SENATE

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[Translation]

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

TRAINING AND RETENTION OF SKILLED WORKFORCE

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, according to the latest report from the Science, Technology and Innovation Council, *State of the Nation 2008*, two in five working-age Canadians lack the skills to cope in a knowledge-based economy. The report also says that Canada is behind in commercial technological research and innovation.

One of the council's strongest recommendations is to train, recruit and retain top talent in Canada. Yet the government is letting an AIDS research team head south of the border.

How will the government act on the recommendation to attract and retain highly talented researchers in Canada?

[English]

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government and Minister of State (Seniors)): Honourable senators, with regard to the story that was in *The Globe and Mail* about the AIDS researcher, if *The Globe and Mail* had done their research properly and consulted the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, they would have learned that the gentleman in question had received a significant sum of money. As well, he softened the apparent criticism that appeared on the front pages of *The Globe and Mail* and indicated that he personally had always received full support from the government. He decided to move to Florida, but he pointed out that a significant part of his research team was staying in Canada.

• (1450)

In answer to Senator Tardif's specific question, the government has undertaken many programs to increase the skill levels of our students as well as to retrain older Canadians, but especially people coming out of our learning institutions, not only in university but also in the trade schools. A significant amount of money has been invested in these areas.

There is a lot of good news as well. If we want to enter the area of competing news coverage, I point to an article in the *Regina Leader-Post* a few days ago about the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarships offering outstanding doctoral students from both Canada and abroad \$50,000 a year for up to three years to study at a Canadian university. This article points out that physicist Elsayed Ali of Egypt was drawn to Canada because of some of the most distinguished researchers in her field. Anthropologist Noorjehan Johnson, an American student, will study Inuit participation and climate change at McGill University. The students have come to Canada because we offer these wonderful programs.

The president of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, Claire Morris, said, "If you want to attract the best and the brightest, you have to be able to compete with those prestigious international scholarships," which is why the government created the Vanier scholarships; to have our own version of the Rhodes and Fulbright scholarships in other countries.

Senator Tardif: In the comments made in the report I mentioned — I will read some to you — "Our ability to tackle the issues important to Canadians . . . will depend on a strong science base and a capacity to innovate." As well, the report indicates: "The current economic environment has reduced the margin for error, and increased the risk and consequences of poor decisions."

What will the government do to increase our science base, to increase our capacity to innovate and will they support the recommendations put forward in this report?

Senator LeBreton: As a point of clarification, is the honourable senator referring to the Science, Technology and Innovation Council report?

Senator Tardif: Yes, I am.

Senator LeBreton: That organization, of course, was set up and established by our government.

Senator Tardif: That is right.

Senator LeBreton: The report supports what the government has said in our Science and Technology Strategy and our investments in the last four budgets; that it is important to encourage business innovation to improve the competitiveness of our economy.

Senator Tardif neglected to mention that the report states that Canada is number one in the G7 and number two in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in its support for basic, discovery-oriented university research.

Our government has taken many steps, as I have said, to improve business innovation including improvements to competition policy, support for venture capital, support for public-private research partnerships geared toward university research commercialization, tax support for investment in information and communications technology, machinery and equipment, and improvements to the scientific research and experimental development tax credit. We are increasing Canada's competitive advantage and innovation to create jobs, to improve our quality of life and to strengthen the economy.

We also recognize in the report the areas where Canada needs improvement. We appreciate the findings of the report. That information is exactly why we set up a council like this one. Previously, the government relied on one individual. This body of learned scientists from across the country can properly advise the government. We put a body like that one in place to begin with so as to obtain accurate advice. Also, we accept some of the concerns they expressed, and we will work hard to improve in these areas.

Senator Comeau: The rest of the story.

• (1455)

Senator Tardif: It is all very well to set up an agency that will deliver on a report; however, the recommendations put forward in the report have to be followed and money has to flow through, which has not often been the case on many projects, as we have seen.

Senator LeBreton: Actually, significant monies have been flowing. I just read from an article in a newspaper. Senator Cowan asked a legitimate question about where some of these monies are being expended and what kind of programs we were pursuing. He delivered a speech in the Senate to which I will be responding next Tuesday. After I have had a chance to put on the record what we have been doing in the area of science and technology, perhaps that will clarify the situation and questions like this will no longer be that necessary.
