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## LITERACY

Inquiry—Debate Continued

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, October 30, 2012

## THE SENATE

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### LITERACY

#### INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Callbeck, calling the attention of the Senate to the importance of literacy, given that more than ever Canada requires increased knowledge and skills in order to maintain its global competitiveness and to increase its ability to respond to changing labour markets.

**Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition):** Honourable senators, I rise today to speak on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Callbeck, calling the attention of the Senate to the importance of literacy, given that Canadians require knowledge and skills in order for Canada to maintain its global competitiveness and to increase its ability to respond to changing labour markets.

I would like to begin by thanking Senator Callbeck for bringing awareness of this issue of great concern and, of course, our colleague, Senator Fairbairn, for being such a relentless advocate of literacy in Canada. Senators Callbeck and Fairbairn's commitment to helping Canadians improve their literacy skills and to calling for a national literacy strategy are efforts that I am both proud of and happy to support.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defines literacy as:

The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in the wider society.

To comprehend the magnitude and implications of this issue, one must first take note of the disquieting statistics of illiteracy in Canada. Although the literacy rate in Canada is reportedly high, around 97 per cent, there is debate about what that measure really means. When broken down by literacy levels, Statistics Canada data shows that almost half of all Canadians adults — that is 48 per cent — have low literacy skills.

As President Margaret Eaton of ABC Life Literacy Canada, a non-profit organization that aims to inspire Canadians to increase their literacy skills explains:

There is learning to read and then there is reading to learn. Not enough Canadians have that skill.

As I have said previously in this chamber — even going back to November 8, 2006 — it is my belief, honourable senators, that most Canadian take it for granted that we are a literate nation. If one 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. The fact is that our conception of what literacy means has fallen far behind what being literate actually entails. In a day and age where technology and knowledge accelerate at such a rapid pace, the essential skills

required to function and prosper involve much more than the ability to read a printed text.

The basic literacy standard is expanding to consider literacy skills needed for today's working skills. These can be broken down into different categories, such as health literacy, computer literacy and statistical literacy, that reflect the demands of a complex world.

• (1530)

[*Translation*]

As the United Nations' definition suggests, literacy includes more than basic reading abilities. It also includes the ability to understand ideas, analyze problems and use a society's symbols and technology to promote personal and community development. Can individuals draft a resumé on a computer? Can they use the Internet to look for a job? Can they solve problems whose solutions are not obvious? Those are some of the skills that have become essential in our knowledge-based society.

The 2003 international adult literacy and skills survey, which enabled Statistics Canada to collect the data I mentioned earlier, measured adults' proficiency in four domains: prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem solving. Then individual skills were rated from one to five, one being the lowest and five the highest. It is generally accepted that level three is the minimum desirable level for those living in a knowledge-based society like Canada. Currently, 48 per cent of Canadians over 16 years of age are below that level for prose literacy and 55 per cent are below level three for numeracy, or basic math skills.

[*English*]

The Canadian Literacy and Learning Network is the national hub for research, information and knowledge exchange and for increasing literacy and essential skills across Canada. According to the network, impoverished adults often do not have the literacy skills required to get into job training programs. They may need literacy skills upgrading before they can succeed in training programs, but only about 5 per cent to 10 per cent of eligible adults enroll in programs. The network also notes that fewer than 20 per cent of people with the lowest literacy skills are employed. This means that the ability of close to 9.8 million adults in this country to fully participate in civic and work life is severely compromised.

Honourable senators, a mere 1 per cent increase in the literacy rate would generate \$18 billion in economic growth every year, which indicates that investment in literacy programming has a 241 per cent return. Unemployment and low literacy levels are thus inherently related. The foundation of strong literacy and essential skills is absolutely necessary to enter the labour market at any level; and no workforce can acquire advanced skills without that quintessential foundation.

Ms. Lindsay Kennedy, President and CEO of the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network highlighted the importance of adequate skills for the Canadian labour force in her testimony last June before the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development with the following remarks:

. . . low job skills, as we used to know them . . . have really disappeared. Most of them have been automated in the last decade. . . . we have not equipped those who have traditionally held those positions with the skills to continue to work in those positions. What's emerged is the fact that we have an ever-widening gap between high- and low-skilled Canadians.

Canada is one of the few industrialized countries without a national system for basic adult education. Literacy and basic adult education, like most social issues such as welfare, health, and education and training fall mainly under the jurisdiction of provincial and territorial governments. However, the federal government plays a role in developing policy directions and in delivering some funds for literacy initiatives through provincial transfer payments, labour market development agreements, and other specialized federally delivered programs as well as the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program.

The provinces and territories are under no obligation to designate specific funds in support of core literacy programs. As a result, literacy services in Canada vary considerably in resources and accessibility from one region of the country to another. Within the provinces and territories, literacy programs may be delivered by various providers, including colleges, school boards, unions and community-based agencies. These may deliver targeted services to a variety of population groups and are usually delivered by trained volunteers. Each province and territory has a coalition that is funded to provide a support network to local literacy organizations within their region.

[*Translation*]

Literacy is a serious issue for our official language communities. The vitality of these communities and their ability to chart their own course depend in large part on the skills and abilities of their members. Given the importance of literacy and basic skills in a knowledge- and information-based economy, it is clear that having information skills will enable official language communities to develop and thrive.

The particular circumstances in which many francophones find themselves with regard to their reading, writing and arithmetic skills require these communities to obtain information and data that will help them to better understand the challenges faced by their members and, in so doing, better target their interventions.

It is in that context that the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey I mentioned previously was conducted. The main purpose of this survey was to gain a better understanding of different aspects of the literacy and language proficiency processes among official language minorities. The survey shed light on a number of facts regarding the literacy situation of official language minorities. I am referring particularly to the fact that there are significant differences between the levels of literacy of anglophones and francophones. The survey shows that francophones, both within and outside Quebec, face significant obstacles, which is the main reason why, for a long time, they have had lower literacy levels than anglophones.

More specifically, 56 per cent of adults whose first language is French have a hard time understanding what they read, compared to 39 per cent of adults whose first language is English. Although the situation of anglophones in Quebec differs from one region to another, overall, their average level of literacy is higher than that of francophones.

The study revealed an important phenomenon with respect to reading and writing habits. At the same education and income levels, francophones are less likely than anglophones to have developed frequent reading and writing habits in their daily life. The differences observed in the literacy levels of francophones living in minority communities are likely the result of a combination of institutional and cultural factors. For example, the fact that English is more commonly used in the workplace and the community, the low value placed on French within political and legal institutions and a lack of French-language infrastructure are factors that can contribute to the insufficient mastery of one's mother tongue.

Clearly, these factors are detrimental to the preservation of the language and the tradition that it represents. We need to better understand how these factors exacerbate education problems within official language minority communities.

• (1540)

[*English*]

Canada's current approach for adult literacy is best described as:

. . . an uneven, under-resourced patchwork that reaches only 1% to 2% of the approximately 9 million less-literate working age Canadians who do not have the literacy skills necessary to fully benefit from, and contribute to, the economic and social development of their communities and our country. This shortfall is unacceptable and it is time to develop a concerted, national plan to address the serious literacy challenges in Canada.

Canada's literacy community has been working for over 25 years to advance literacy in Canada and to make the issue a priority for policy development and action.

In recent years, the federal, provincial and territorial governments, and representatives from business, labour and the community sector have all identified literacy advances as an important and necessary Canadian priority. In June 2003, an all-party parliamentary standing committee of the House of Commons released a report entitled *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*.

As I have tried to highlight through this inquiry, we have serious literacy challenges in Canada. Only a small percentage of Canadians are in training programs to improve their skills. Canada's current literacy infrastructure is not equipped to fill these gaps. As a result, access to literacy services varies widely depending on location and personal circumstances. This is unacceptable in a nation that prides itself on its quality of life and its belief in social equity.

The Government of Canada must serve as a leader on this front. A national literacy strategy is necessary to set policy standards and elementary guidelines for the provinces and territories in order to ensure that all Canadians have the basic skills necessary for today's workforce. Such a strategy must address the regional and language disparities presented throughout this inquiry.

I would like to conclude with the following remarks prepared by the Movement for Canadian Literacy in its National Literacy Action Plan 2006-2016. I quote:

Traditionally, the literacy community has been left to address the literacy challenges alone, with insufficient, short-

term funding and too few professional supports; and without the benefit of a coordinated national vision and strategy. As a society, we can no longer afford to ignore this urgent reality. Addressing Canada's literacy challenges will pay off in terms of the most pressing issues of our time: the labour market and the economy, children's outcomes,

population health, community development and safety, immigrant settlement, social cohesion, and more.

This is a call for leadership, attention and action on this very serious issue. Thank you.

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