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EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Training and Skills Development

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Thursday, December 5, 2013

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Hon. Claudette Tardif: Leader, in the Speech from the Throne, the government identified a mismatch between unemployed workers and job vacancies as the main problem in terms of job creation.

• (1410)

I am not denying that this is a problem. However, recent OECD reports show that Canada is faced with more fundamental problems.

An extensive study published by the OECD in October, entitled, *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies*, reveals that young Canadians are well below average when it comes to literacy and mathematics, compared to 23 developed countries.

If we compare the results to the results of a similar assessment carried out in 2003, we can see that Canada is falling behind. Another OECD study published this week, entitled, *Programme for International Student Assessment*, which assesses the skills and knowledge of 15-year-olds, also shows that Canada has been falling behind for the past 10 years or so, especially in mathematics and sciences.

Leader, it is time to stop congratulating ourselves on the quality of our education systems and acknowledge that the results are getting worse instead of better. What is the government's strategy to halt this worrisome decline and ensure that Canada is preparing Canadians for success in the knowledge economy?

Hon. Claude Carignan (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, as you know, no other government has done more for students than this one. Post-secondary enrolment in Canada is at an all-time high, with nearly two million students enrolled.

We have improved incentives to increase the number of apprenticeships and skilled trades certificates. We have also made more loans available than the previous Liberal government for college and university students, to help them finance their post-secondary studies.

We announced improvements to Canadian scholarship programs that benefitted 290,000 students. That is double the number that benefitted from the old Liberal program. The Repayment Assistance Plan helped 165,000 students.

I think, senator, that Canada is a leader in education and a source of inspiration for many other countries. We should be proud of that.

Senator Tardif: I have a supplementary question.

Last month, the president of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, John Manley, said that Canada has taken a step backwards in terms of training and essential skills, and that that is the biggest threat to our economic success. He is calling on the government to adopt a national strategy in order to improve our results.

Mr. Manley said the following:

[English]

This is on the scale of a national emergency.... We've got the natural resource sector to pay the rent, but that just keeps us in the house. We need skills, we need knowledge-workers to really improve our prosperity and build our society.... Having the skills becomes a very important element to attracting investment and creating jobs.

[Translation]

What is the government's strategy with regard to training and skills for our youth and workers?

Senator Carignan: I want to read from an article from *The Canadian Press*.

Obviously, Canada does quite well in this area, ranking among the best in the world. The OECD says Canada is one of the best places to live, but that is not something that would hold the media's attention for very long.

The Canadian Press wrote the following:

When it comes to measuring the good life, Canada is among the world's top spots for individual well-being, according to report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The others in the top category are Australia, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, the U.S. and Norway.

The Paris-based organization does not issue a specific ranking, but OECD officials said the countries in the highest tier scored in the top 20 per cent in all 11 major categories assessed.

The categories include income and wealth, employment, health status, housing, education expectancy and attainment, work-life balance and personal security.

Canadians scored at or near the top in terms of having a low long-term unemployment rate, health status, housing, education and skills, social connections, personal security (low crime), and in life satisfaction.

Senator Tardif: There are significant gaps in Canada in terms of developing training and learning policies. There is also a lack of reliable data that would enable us to compare the strengths and weaknesses of different education and training systems in Canada.

This situation was exacerbated in 2010 when the government eliminated funding for the Canadian Council on Learning, which compiled important information on education in Canada and analyzed it according to OECD indicators.

I would like to quote Dr. Paul Cappon, the former President and CEO of the Canadian Council on Learning, who commented on the recent OECD reports as follows:

[*English*]

“Not only is Canada mediocre at best; we now know that our future in learning — and therefore our prosperity — is more clouded than ever.”

Canadian educational systems... refuse to measure and report against each other inside Canada, allowing us to “ignore — or worse — pretend that we are world beaters.”

We’re always trying to beat everybody else. That’s one I had not heard.

“Why bother with the evidence? Complacency is sufficient unto itself.”

That seems to be a key word for this government.

[*Translation*]

Given that Canada is losing ground in education, what will the government do and how can we make sure we get the reliable data we need to implement policies that will work for Canadians?

Senator Carignan: Senator Tardif, I disagree with your premise, but as I explained earlier, we will continue to work to improve incentives to increase internships, for example for those seeking apprenticeships and skilled trades certifications.

We will continue to work for post-secondary education and we will continue to improve and correct the legacy of the Liberals, who made cuts in the transfers to the provinces, particularly in transfers for post-secondary education. As a result, we had to increase the Canada Social Transfer by 44 per cent. We will continue to build a better future with young Canadians.
