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HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Canadian Council on Learning

Question by

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, November 15, 2011

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

CANADIAN COUNCIL ON LEARNING

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, my question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate. On October 11, the Canadian Council on Learning, which will not have its funding renewed in 2012, published its report on the state of provincial education systems.

The conclusion is rather dismal. The lack of political will, the fear of intergovernmental conflicts and a lack of funding have resulted in mediocre literacy rates, slipping school performance and a serious shortfall in cutting-edge research. In addition, these factors directly affect Canadians' level of education and global competitiveness.

In light of the weaknesses identified by the Canadian Council on Learning, will the government finally acknowledge that the situation is urgent and that it must exercise the leadership required to develop a national learning strategy?

[English]

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): I have made it very clear in the past that the Canadian Council on Learning is like many programs: They have a beginning and an end; they do not go on in perpetuity.

This particular council was provided with one-time funding of \$85 million over five years in 2004; therefore, its funding would have run out in 2009. Our government did extend funding for one more year, to March of 2010.

It is quite incorrect to say that funding was cut. They had an envelope of funding over five years, and we extended it to six.

[Translation]

Senator Tardif: I believe the leader did not fully understand my question, which had less to do with funding cuts to the Canadian Council on Learning, and more to do with one of its recommendations.

The lack of a national education coordination strategy and mechanism makes Canada a unique case, while other federations such as Australia, Switzerland and Germany have a permanent federal planning mechanism or a federal department of education.

Given the rather dark picture painted by the Canadian Council on Learning, is it really wise for the government not to join other industrialized countries in acknowledging the need to adopt a national strategy on learning?

[English]

Senator LeBreton: I only mentioned the Canadian Council on Learning because Senator Tardif has raised it before and incorrectly stated that the funding was cut.

Obviously, honourable senators, post-secondary education plays a big role in our country's economy. Budget 2011 forgives a portion of Canada student loans for new family physicians and nurses who work in underserved rural and remote communities. Budget 2011 will double the in-study income exemption from \$50 to \$100 a week, which will help about 100,000 students. Budget 2011 eliminated interest for part-time students while they are studying and improved access to the Canada grants program.

For skilled trades, the budget makes all occupational trade and professional examination fees eligible for the tuition tax credit, and 30,000 Canadians are expected to benefit from this move. We introduced the Canada Student Grants Program, and our Repayment Assistance Plan helped approximately 160,000 borrowers in repayment last year.

Scholarships and bursaries are now tax-free. We introduced the textbook and tools tax credit. We are helping young people get the work experience they need. As honourable senators know, we permanently increased Canada summer jobs by \$10 million, or 3,500 additional jobs per year, for a total of about 40,000 jobs for students each summer.

Career Focus helps employers provide recent graduates with internships, helping 2,800 graduates in 2010-11. Budget 2011 provides \$20 million to the Canadian Youth Business Foundation.

I think, honourable senators, it is quite incorrect to state that this government does not have a national plan for the advancement of education in our society.