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DISPARITIES IN FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION

Inquiry—Debate Continued

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, December 2, 2014

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

DISPARITIES IN FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Dyck, calling the attention of the Senate to the disparities in educational attainments of First Nations people, inequitable funding of on-reserve schools and insufficient funding for postsecondary education.

Hon. Claudette Tardif: Honourable senators, I am pleased to rise to speak to Senator Dyck's inquiry on the disparities in educational attainments of First Nations people and on the inequitable funding of on-reserve schools. I want to thank our honourable colleague for this initiative.

The alarming state of First Nations education caught the attention of the public and the media as a result of the introduction of Bill C-33 and the rejection of some aspects of this reform by the Assembly of First Nations on May 27. As you know, this issue has been around for a long time.

[English]

For years, successive studies and reports have revealed that First Nations education is in crisis, that dropout rates are much higher than the Canadian average, and that inadequate funding is a major problem.

The statistics are staggering. According to 2013-14 standardized test results recently published by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the majority of First Nations students on reserves in Ontario and Alberta are failing at reading, writing and math. Students in Atlantic Canada and Manitoba are also struggling.

On-reserve school buildings are often crumbling or infested with mould, or they do not include library, laboratory or gym facilities. Too often, the teachers are underpaid, the textbooks are inadequate, and the schools are not heated properly. Nearly 60 per cent of Aboriginal students living on reserves drop out of high school. In the rest of Canada, the dropout rate is less than 10 per cent. The Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples published a report in 2011 that revealed that, in some communities, 70 per cent of students do not graduate from high school. The statistics for university graduation are equally upsetting. Only 7 per cent of First Nations people have a university degree. Once again, this is far below the national average, which is around 23 per cent.

The dropout rate is not the only cause for concern. There is also the alarming youth suicide rate, which is five times higher than the national average; the fact that Aboriginal women are eight times more likely to be murdered than other Canadian women; and the disproportionately high incarceration rate. In addition, overcrowding and substandard, on-reserve housing is a major concern. Even if students are attending a good school, living in a

two-bedroom house with 10 people does not provide an adequate environment for study purposes.

In October 2013, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples visited a number of Canadian Aboriginal communities in six provinces. At the conclusion of his visit, he criticized the current situation. He stated:

Canada consistently ranks among the top of countries in respect to human development standards, and yet amidst this wealth and prosperity, aboriginal people live in conditions akin to those in countries that rank much lower and in which poverty abounds.

[Translation]

Long-term underfunding from the federal government is one major factor affecting the quality of First Nations education. The federal government spends less money per child than the provinces. For example, public schools administered by the Province of Alberta receive about \$7,000 in funding per student. On-reserve schools managed by the federal government receive only \$4,000, which represents a difference of \$3,000 per student.

Furthermore, provincial public schools have the support of an administrative structure that helps run schools by developing the curriculum and providing all kinds of essential administrative services.

• (1530)

The approximately 500 schools located on reserves operate without the same structural support from school boards and provincial departments. To resolve these serious problems that have gone on for far too long, the government needs to undertake a comprehensive reform in cooperation with the First Nations and it needs to make significant investments to improve infrastructure and address the funding gap.

The alternative to these investments is the status quo, which will result in much greater economic and social costs.

According to the 2009 report of the Centre for the Study of Living Standards entitled *The Effect of Increasing Aboriginal Educational Attainment on the Labour Force, Output and the Fiscal Balance*, if we were to bridge the educational and occupational gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, we would be able to generate an economic gain of \$400.5 million, reduce government spending and increase government tax revenues by about \$115 billion for the period from 2001 to 2026. Another study conducted by the same centre in 2010 shows that the growth of the Aboriginal workforce would allow the government to save \$1.9 billion per year as of 2026.

Aboriginal peoples are a fast-growing segment of the Canadian population and represent a much younger group than non-Aboriginal Canadians. By 2020, over 50 per cent of the Aboriginal population will be less than 25 years old. Ironically, Canada is currently underfunding the education of the youngest segment of its population.

A quality education that meets the needs of Aboriginal people is essential in order to improve the opportunities available to these young people. We need to build a knowledge-based society with and for all Canadians. In the information age, ignorance is synonymous with exclusion, starting with our Aboriginal peoples. We especially need to respect the fundamental right of Aboriginal children to a quality education that promotes their development and recognizes their heritage.

First Nations have long ago determined the broader objectives that should guide their education system. They want the government to respect their natural right to develop and administer their children's education. They want an education that will turn out Aboriginal citizens who live up to their potential, who are prepared to shoulder the responsibilities of their community and who have economic, language and cultural skills.

The Mi'kmaq education system in Nova Scotia, which has a 90 per cent success rate with respect to high school graduation, is often held up as a good example. That is why Ghislain Picard, Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, is asking that the federal government cede control of young Aboriginals' education to First Nations by the start of the next school year.

Honourable senators, as a Franco-Albertan and an educator, I can bear witness to how important it is for a minority group to establish a strong, flexible education system that is specifically tailored to their community. In recent decades, the emergence of francophone school boards and French-language public schools changed the face of francophone minority communities.

Honourable colleagues, we often see education as training solely intended to prepare students for the workforce, and thus we value it mostly for its economic utility. However, education is about sharing a cultural and intellectual heritage. It is about ensuring a common future as well as the survival and continuation of a community's language, values and culture.

It is hardly surprising that the content and control of education is at the heart of important political struggles. The destiny of a people is unavoidably tied to how the children are taught. That is especially true for minority groups that must coexist with society and a majority culture.

The history of First Nations is clearly different from that of Canada's francophones. It is impossible to understand the current issues, in particular the education disparities, without fully understanding their history and the profound injustices that were committed in the past.

The 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples documented several of these injustices. The report recognized that successive governments repeatedly sought to mould Aboriginal peoples and their social structures to fit their own ideals, in part by taking control of education.

It is important to understand that First Nations members were uprooted and deprived of their traditional territory. They were also uprooted socially and culturally, which curtailed their ability to pass down their values and traditions to subsequent generations. This policy of uprooting people probably reached its peak with the introduction of residential schools. The outcomes of these policies were disastrous; their repercussions are being felt to this day.

According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur, the fundamental problem is related to the fact that First Nations have a deep distrust of governments and their institutions. It is important for the government to remember the grave injustices of the past. In many ways, they are the backdrop that informs First Nations' relationship with the Crown.

Over the past few years, a degree of consensus has emerged on reforming First Nations education. Unfortunately, education reform is hampered by the strained relationship between the government and First Nations. That was very clear during the talks over the past few months.

As you know, First Nations chiefs officially rejected Bill C-33 and are calling for a new agreement to reform education for children in their communities. So far, the minister has refused to reconsider the proposal and threatened to provide no additional support until the proposed reforms are agreed to. The minister seems to have forgotten that reforms are only good if they are just.

The First Nations believe that the government is using the money issue to reinforce its bargaining power and impose its reforms. Minister Valcourt tried to impose the government's will and refused to negotiate with the First Nations.

The Harper government thinks that the Assembly of First Nations either needs to accept the changes proposed in Bill C-33 or accept the status quo. In the meantime, a new cohort of Aboriginal students started its first school year in September in classrooms without the resources that students need to be able to learn. Once again, the students are suffering and the government chooses not to intervene.

The government seriously needs to show some good faith to improve relations with the First Nations. Last May, the Assembly of First Nations asked that the \$1.9 billion in funding provided for in Bill C-33 be immediately sent to the communities, but the government refused. Immediately making up the funding deficit for Aboriginal students would be a step in the right direction. Furthermore, if the government were to eliminate the 2 per cent annual cap on the Post-Secondary Student Support Program, it would also help restore trust.

[*English*]

Since the mid- to late 1990s, there has been a 2 per cent cap on the amount that spending on Aboriginal education can grow each year for access to post-secondary education.

In a *National Post* article dated November 12, 2014, journalist Steve Rennie quotes from a 2013 Aboriginal Affairs internal document urging the government to raise the cap on Aboriginal education.

The department's own document states:

For the (kindergarten to Grade 12) education programs to maintain provincial comparability and NOT draw on other program funds. . . new investments are required, including a 4.5 per cent escalator on all K-12 education program funds going forward (starting in 2014/15). . . .

• (1540)

The request to eliminate the 2 per cent cap has repeatedly been made by our First Nations and Inuit peoples as well as by numerous other associations over a number of years. Two weeks ago, I had the pleasure of meeting representatives from the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations who recommended once again to government the elimination of the 2 per cent cap.

[*Translation*]

Honourable senators, for years now, many stakeholders and studies have been recommending that the underfunding be addressed through an immediate and separate measure. I was pleased to learn recently that the government had confirmed \$500 million in funding in support of on-reserve schools, even though that amount had already been announced in the last federal budget.

Could I please have five more minutes?

Hon. Leo Housakos (Acting Speaker): Honourable senators, is it agreed that Senator Tardif have an additional five minutes?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator Tardif: Thank you.

However, the \$1.9 billion in funding that had been promised has still not been paid out.

It is time, honourable senators, for the federal government to commit to working in partnership with First Nations. As Ghislain Picard, Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, said in a *Hill Times* article on November 17, 2014, and I quote:

[The government needs to] embrace the underlying principles here of partnership, fairness, respect and recognition.

The government can invest immediately in the future of young Aboriginal Canadians, prove that it cares about their education and set the tone for the future. The least the federal government can do is guarantee equal funding. We have owed this to First Nations peoples for quite some time. We owe it to ourselves as a democratic country. Thank you.

(On motion of Senator Fraser, for Senator Dyck, debate adjourned.)
