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HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Post-Secondary Student Support Program

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, November 29, 2011

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HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

POST-SECONDARY STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAM

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, currently the federal government provides financial assistance to First Nations and Inuit students through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program, which was created to alleviate the financial barriers faced by Aboriginal students. Unfortunately, increases in funding to this program are currently capped at a maximum of 2 per cent annually. As a result, funding has been unable to keep up with increased living costs and tuition fees. Additionally, according to the Assembly of First Nations and many student groups that we have met across the country, the 2 per cent cap means that fewer eligible applicants receive funding every year. From 1997 to 2009, the number of annual recipients has dropped from 23,000 to under 19,000 students.

In light of the fact that increasing access to post-secondary education will help close the employment and earning gaps between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population, will the government eliminate the 2 per cent cap on this program to ensure that the educational needs of all Aboriginal Canadians are met?

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): I thank Senator Tardif for the question. Of course, I will not accept the premise of her question. With regard to Aboriginal education, we are working with willing partners to improve the educational outcome of First Nations across Canada. That is why we made education a key priority in our joint action plan with the Assembly of First Nations. As well, the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education, which was launched just last June, is continuing its hard work. We are committed to a new approach to providing support to First Nations and Inuit students for post-secondary education that is effective, accountable, and coordinated with other federal student support programs. We will continue to listen to interested parties on ways to help First Nations and Inuit students receive the support they need to participate in post-secondary education. We expanded our partnership with the provinces, First Nations and Inuit, through tripartite agreements on education, and established the Education Partnerships Program and the First Nation Student Success Program. In the last two years, the government

has provided over \$173 million to build new schools or renovate First Nations schools under the Economic Action Plan.

[Translation]

Senator Tardif: I have a supplementary question. My question for the Leader of the Government was very specific: more than 3,000 eligible Aboriginal students were denied funding in 2008 and there is currently a backlog of more than 10,000 eligible students.

A recent report raised in this chamber by Senator Dyck shows that filling the educational gap between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals for the current generation of students could generate savings of up to \$90 billion in Saskatchewan alone.

Why does the government not commit to eliminating the 2 per cent ceiling in order to help the First Nations and the Inuit?

That was my question.

• (1450)

[English]

Senator LeBreton: Honourable senators, I believe I answered the question in response to the first question. There has been significant work done between the government and the leadership of the First Nations community. Significant amounts of money have been put into secondary and post-secondary education. I do believe that the government, especially as we work in remote communities in the North, is making every effort to provide education so that young Aboriginal students, whether living on-reserve or off-reserve or in the North, have access to education, as a result of which they will have access to good quality jobs.

Senator Tardif: Can I understand by the answer that the leader will not be removing the 2 per cent cap?

Senator LeBreton: The senator can understand from my answer that we will be working in cooperation with the AFN in our ongoing efforts to improve the situation with regard to education for our Aboriginal youth.