



CANADA

Debates of the Senate

1st SESSION

• 39th PARLIAMENT

• VOLUME 143

• NUMBER 58

STATE OF LITERACY

Inquiry—Debate Continued

Speech by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Thursday, December 7, 2006

THE SENATE

Thursday, December 7, 2006

STATE OF LITERACY

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Fairbairn, P.C., calling the attention of the Senate to the State of Literacy in Canada, which will give every Senator in this Chamber the opportunity to speak out on an issue in our country that is often forgotten.—(*Honourable Senator Robichaud, P.C.*)

The Hon. the Speaker *pro tempore*: Honourable senators, Senator Poy has asked permission to answer a question that was asked during debate on this inquiry.

Is leave granted for Senator Poy to have five minutes to answer that question?

Hon. Gerald J. Comeau (Deputy Leader of the Government): We agree to five minutes.

Hon. Vivienne Poy: Honourable senators, pursuant to rule 37(1), I have sought leave of the Senate to speak a second time on this inquiry to clarify certain parts of my speech given on November 21, 2006, about which Senator Tkachuk raised some questions.

My speech focused on the importance of literacy programs to immigrants of working age, since they score significantly below Canadian-born individuals on literacy tests. I pointed out that an increasing number of immigrants, like me, do not speak English or French as their mother tongues. Yet, they are an important part of our labour market because they are predicted to account for almost all net labour force growth by 2011.

Senator Tkachuk asked how the cuts to literacy funding have affected immigrants. Although all immigrants are foreign born, there is a difference between newcomers and those who have been in Canada for a number of years and are now citizens. It is true that adult newcomers to Canada do receive federal funds for language training provided by Citizenship and Immigration Canada with federal-provincial agreements through the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada, LINC, program.

LINC clients can participate for up to three years from the time they start training. Quebec, Manitoba and British Columbia negotiated separate agreements with the federal government but have programs similar to LINC.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada also provides limited funding to the Enhanced Language Training Initiative for higher levels of language training to help foreign-trained professionals find work. However, these programs are not open to Canadian citizens, many of whom are immigrants. As of May 15, 2001, 5.4 million people, or 18.4 per cent of the total population, were foreign born. Today, almost 20 per cent of our total population is

foreign born, and in Toronto the proportion is almost 50 per cent.

Eighty-one per cent of immigrants who arrived between 1986 and 1995 have become citizens. Recent immigrants take up citizenship more quickly than earlier immigrants, with most obtaining citizenship after three to four years, as soon as they are eligible.

The executive director of the Ottawa Community Coalition for Literacy notes that immigrants find that LINC training focuses too much on speaking skills and does not give them the document literacy skills they need to function and work in Canada. Once they become citizens, they end up in regular literacy classes.

A study published in the year 2000 found that in Ontario alone 67 per cent of immigrants failed to reach level 3 in document literacy, a level generally considered minimal for functioning adequately in Canadian society.

A list of the literacy cuts across the country can be found on ABC Canada Literacy Foundation's website. All of these cuts affect immigrants who are citizens or no longer eligible for LINC as much as they affect other Canadians.

To summarize, in Alberta, half the literacy funding has been cut. The Saskatchewan Literacy Network is in imminent jeopardy of closing its doors, which means that the support for their literacy system will be eliminated. In Manitoba, Literacy Partners of Manitoba will lose about 80 per cent of its funding. In Ontario, the development of adult literacy teaching resources, research and professional development will be severely reduced. In Quebec, the Quebec English Literacy Alliance in Lachute faces closure, and the operating budget for Regroupement des groupes populaires en alphabétisation du Québec is effectively cut in half. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the provincial body will only be able to survive on surpluses for about five months. These are only some of the results of the cuts.

As many immigrants are of working age and are crucial to our labour productivity, their success will in many respects determine Canada's future. I firmly believe that cutting literacy funding is hurting Canadians, and I am pleased that the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology has been authorized to examine this issue.

Hon. Bill Rompkey: Honourable senators, I want to thank Senator Fairbairn for bringing this issue forward.

I wish to speak on the issue with regard to my home province, and my comments will be in line, to a degree, with what Senator Sibbeston said yesterday. However, I notice that the hour is late. I wonder whether the Senate would allow me to adjourn the debate in my name to continue at a later time.

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

On motion of Senator Rompkey, debate adjourned.