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STATE OF LITERACY

Inquiry

Speech by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Tuesday, November 21, 2006

THE SENATE

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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.*)

Hon. Vivienne Poy: Honourable senators, I wish to congratulate and commend our colleague Senator Fairbairn for raising this inquiry on literacy. She has provided exemplary leadership on this issue over many years and remains its greatest advocate. I also want to thank Senator Segal for his reasoned comments on this important issue.

Senator Fairbairn put forward this inquiry in June of this year, and since then the federal government has withdrawn \$17.7 million from the federal adult learning and literacy program while Canada has a surplus of \$13.2 billion. The cuts were rationalized by so-called efficiency, or the argument that programs were not in line with the priorities of Canadians. It is evident that this government believes literacy is not a priority for Canadians because Senator Fairbairn, as well as other honourable senators, has made it clear that the money was not being wasted. I find it particularly ironic that this government has dismantled the National Literacy Secretariat, which was the initiative of former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

We have heard from many others about the personal plight of those who struggle with literacy as well as the specific costs of this recent decision to the work of literacy advocates in the various provinces.

Today, I will focus on literacy in relation to the immigrant population, since this issue has not been addressed in any detail.

Senator Tkachuk pointed out that literacy levels have not increased over the last decade, remaining at low levels, for 42 per cent, of Canadians of working age. That is 9 million Canadians. He concluded that existing programs are not working. I believe there may be many reasons why this is so, reasons that have nothing to do with the efficacy of the existing programs. As Senator Segal said, literacy programs may be working, but as some individuals improve, other populations take their place at the lower end of the spectrum.

That is evident among new Canadians. Consider that immigration is increasingly responsible for the growth of our labour force. Immigrants who arrived during the 1990s accounted for about 70 per cent of the net labour force growth between 1991 and 2001. That is predicted to increase to 100 per cent over the next decade, due to the low birth rate of Canadians.

Many of these immigrants are from countries where neither French nor English is the language spoken in the home. In 2003, only one in 10 immigrants spoke English or French as their

mother tongue compared to almost one in three in 1980. While the most recent Immigration Act puts more stress on English-and/or French-language skills, and it is a fact that recent immigrants are more highly educated than the Canadian-born population, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey still found that immigrants aged 16 to 65 performed significantly below the average for the Canadian-born population.

What we need, given the challenges faced by new Canadians, is a redoubling of efforts and increased funding for literacy in our official languages rather than cuts to essential programming. Otherwise, we are abandoning our immigrant population and putting our economic future at risk.

I believe the present government should take heed of a new report by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards, which found that Canada is already falling behind in productivity, at number 17 out of 23 industrialized countries studied. One of the four recommendations of the centre was reducing employment barriers for skilled immigrants in part by focusing on fostering the basic skills of the labour force.

The government must recognize that one of the greatest barriers to immigrant integration is low literacy levels in one of our official languages. This report reinforces the findings of a C.D. Howe study that said that, by increasing literacy skills by 1 per cent relative to the international average, Canada will increase its productivity by 2.5 per cent.

• (1710)

The government's position is that it will still be investing \$81 million over two years in adult learning, literacy and essential skills programs, and the cuts were made so as not to duplicate spending by other levels of government.

Honourable senators have provided numerous examples of programs that have ended or will end soon, and these programs are fulfilling an existing need. Eliminating funding by the federal government for local and community level programming by Human Resources and Social Development Canada hurts communities. I question how literacy is to be tackled, except by community groups at community and local levels.

The response we have received from the Leader of the Government in the Senate when she was asked what will happen to existing programs is that she is sure literacy volunteers will not discontinue their work despite the cuts.

We need to keep in mind that volunteers need government support too. Why destroy the work of so many, and for what purpose? We are aware that most literacy efforts run on minimal budgets anyway, often with only one staff person or less, and volunteers are already the backbone of community literacy efforts.

In Toronto, a local literacy worker shared her fears about the recent cuts. In a forum of the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto on October 11, 2006, she said:

Many years of hard work and much money have gone into building these networks and coalitions...which have proven to work and benefit many. Now it is under the threat of collapse. The government is going in the wrong direction. Shutting down such networks leaves practitioners and agencies isolated instead of working together.

Without literacy there is poverty. Among the immigrant population, poverty leads to isolation, lack of integration and potential problems in terms of social cohesion. I need not remind honourable senators that allowing for ghettoization of new communities and neglecting poverty can have dramatic consequences in terms of the economic and social health of our cities.

The Honourable John Baird was quoted in *The Toronto Star* on September 29, 2006, as stating:

...we've got to fix the ground floor problem and not be trying to do repair work...

I wonder why he does not listen to literacy advocates who say it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel and that we should expand on what is already working well.

It is similarly disturbing that the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development was not able to name any literacy groups that were consulted prior to these cuts, and it is still unclear how and where monies will be spent in terms of literacy.

We need much clearer direction from the government on this issue. I invite all honourable senators to support this inquiry, which is crucial to the future of Canada.
