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Bill No. 143 – *The Degree Authorization Amendment Act, 2014*

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today on Bill No. 143, An Act to amend *The Degree Authorization Act*. And this is relatively a short, straightforward piece of legislation.

And I'll talk a bit about it, but I do have to say, you know, sometimes you hear us on this side of the House talk about how the minister's comments aren't that long, but in this case they were quite extensive. I was wondering if he wanted to go, if he was working for our side that night with his speech. It was quite lengthy. What's that?

An Hon. Member: New minister.

Mr. Forbes: New minister, yes. It was quite thorough and it provided quite a review of the degree authorization process. He was really doing his job. And so for that I do want to say thanks. And he does talk about the five or six circumstances where the grandfathering provision for allowing the new post-secondary institutions to get up to speed, be able to be in the right place to grant degrees, and it seemed each one had kind of a unique circumstance that was not allowing them to be in the place they wanted to be. But I found it very interesting.

I mean the Act is straightforward. We actually do want to see . . . In many ways, we have a really well-educated population in many ways in Saskatchewan. In fact actually I think Saskatoon . . . I could be corrected by the folks but I think that Saskatoon at one time boasted the highest per capita degree-holding city in Canada. And it was quite something that we were very proud of.

But it's interesting to have other degree institutions come online, become available to our students in Saskatchewan throughout the province. And that's an important thing. And of course, as we know, post-secondary learning is expanding in so many different ways that it's very important that we make sure everything is done appropriately.

Now the minister referenced the Saskatchewan Higher Education Quality Assurance Board and of course we haven't heard much about that board since it was established a few years ago. And we'll have questions about that: who is on the board, the kind of work they're doing, the costs that are involved. But it's an important board to have because their role is to make sure that when people do receive degrees and they do receive post-secondary education, a higher education in Saskatchewan, that there are assurances that it is the best possible, that it's working at the level it should be. And it's arm's length, and that's very, very important. And so we'll have questions about that because we just want to be brought up to speed on that.

It does talk about that they were part of the groups that were consulted with. The ministerial staff discussed the consultations with the stakeholders, including the quality assurance board, the institutions, and the broader Saskatchewan post-secondary sector. You know, I remember a few years ago when we were first talking about this, some of the groups that they hadn't consulted with were students. And I don't know if in this case they did talk to the students, particularly those who have been enrolled in these institutions that the government minister references, whether it'd be Briercrest College, Cape Breton University, Great Plains College, Athabasca University, and Lakeland College.

What exactly has been their experience at these post-secondary institutions? Are they meeting the expectations of students? Are students experiencing success in terms of quality of learning and the outcomes that they were expecting to have, and then leading on to further training or leading on to a career? Is it really meeting the goals and objectives that we had heard this government set out a few years ago?

So I would be curious to know from the minister: did they consult with students and the student organizations that might be involved? I think that's an important stakeholder group that's important to hear from. As well we know that, and we've seen this and we saw this happen in the spring with another post-secondary bill that came forward, the one group that hadn't been consulted were the faculties. Have the faculties been consulted with? The teachers, the instructors, were they part of the discussions at all in terms of these amendments?

You know, they do seem relatively straightforward and we do want to be able to see these institutions succeed. And if we can make that happen, that's a good thing. But we do not want to see a delay or . . . Well students are paying fees and having expectations. And if these institutions are in any way representing themselves in a way that they shouldn't be, then it's important that we don't let this go on and on and on. Either they will be able to, you know, grant degrees or they will not be able to. So we need to have clarity around that. That's why it'll be interesting and it would be interesting to hear from the Saskatchewan Higher Education Quality Assurance Board. They're not a very high-profile organization, and I don't know if they need to be. I'm not demanding that they do much more than what they're doing now, but I don't know whether they have an annual report. How do they report out? How many times do they meet a year? What are their costs? What are the kind of questions that they're dealing with?

And so I think that it's important that we know much more about that because I understand . . . And I don't know what the role is when the minister talks about that they've been having discussions and consulted with stakeholders, including the quality assurance board. Were there other concerns that they brought forward? What were all the concerns, all the suggestions from the stakeholders? Was this the only one? Is this the only issue that they had was the fact that they weren't going to meet their deadlines in terms of meeting the requirements around degrees? Were there other concerns that they had? We don't know. I mean in terms of a lengthy speech like this, you would think maybe the minister would have identified them, but he clearly hadn't, and I think that it's important that we hear the full discussion.

So if there is an annual report, we may be taking a look to see what they actually have been identifying. Or do they only report out to the minister? While being arm's length, that's very important, but do they only report out to the minister? I'm not sure about that. So is this something that cabinet is the only group that has access to this information? I'm not sure.

So we have those kind of questions for the minister and it would be great, it's always timely to have a full discussion about the state of affairs for, the state of affairs in terms of the quality of post-secondary education here in Saskatchewan. And if it can be informed by this board as it's supposed to be, then that would be great to hear. And how do they keep in touch? How do people access, how do students access the quality assurance board?

I don't know if many students are aware that there is a Saskatchewan Higher Education Quality Assurance Board. Is it one that often has a presence at post-secondary facilities in our province? I have not heard many students talk about raising concerns to them. Do they meet on a regular basis with faculties, administration, and students? I'm not sure about that.

So I have some questions about that. But as I say, this is a time these things get profiled. It gets profiled and we really have some interest in this because, as I say, you know, we take a lot of pride in our institutions here in Saskatchewan. And we know the University of Saskatchewan went through a major challenge last spring with TransformUS. And it would be interesting to know what the quality assurance board had to say about that, you know. And were they part of the discussions around TransformUS, or is this only for the smaller post-secondary organizations? Or do they have any thoughts, any comments around what's happening at the University of Saskatchewan?

Now the University of Regina, we always feel like we've got to give equal time. If we talk about University of Saskatchewan, you've got to definitely talk about University of Regina. Do they have any comments about University of Regina? I'd be curious to know about that as well.

So having said that, Mr. Speaker, I think this is an interesting piece of legislation that allows us to ask further questions about how things are going in the post-secondary world, and I know that we will have those questions in committee. But at this point, I

know many of my colleagues will want to get in on the debate on this piece of legislation, Bill No. 143, *The Degree Authorization Act*. Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker.