

SECOND SESSION - TWENTY-SEVENTH LEGISLATURE

of the

Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

(HANSARD) Published under the authority of The Honourable Dan D'Autremont Speaker

N.S. VOL. 55 NO. 38A MONDAY, MARCH 25 2013 1:30 p.m.

Budget Debate

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I found that speech very interesting. It reminded me of one of those fact-finder, fact-truth detectors that they have on CNN [Cable News Network] during the leadership or the presidential debates. And that thing would be just spinning out of control after listening to that speech and the previous ones. I just have to say it was very entertaining. I don't know how much was solid in there, but what the heck. It's always entertaining to hear folks speak regardless if the truth does happen to get in the way a little bit every once in a while.

But, Mr. Speaker, I do want to say one thing before I start. And I want to just comment on the member I think was from Turtleford, the member's statement today about the highway workers and how I totally agree with that. And I think our highway workers and the good job they've done over the course of this winter and this spring, and we know it's not over yet. But the hat's off to those guys, hat's off to those guys, the guys working the plows, working the phones.

And I've got to tell you, I feel like I just check that hotline all the time even if I'm not driving for a couple of days. I feel I'm in that habit. But I've got to tell you, it's been the worst winter. In fact I was just making a list of the five blizzards we've had this winter where I know I've been affected. I know the first one was . . . Actually it was interesting. It was the SFL convention, but I think the folks opposite were having a convention in Saskatoon and many had a hard time getting up to that convention. There was one around Remembrance Day weekend. There was one in January. In fact actually the first day again coming back to the legislature there was a blizzard, and people had a hard time getting in on that Sunday. So clearly those folks have just worked just amazingly — and good member's statement.

But we're here to talk about the budget, and clearly our role in the opposition is to provide scrutiny and to make sure that it's as transparent and as accountable as possible. And I know the member just prior to me talked about the checklist, and I do have a

couple of spots where those checks didn't actually land on the paper. And we'll maybe talk about that, but we do have some concerns.

And I know one of them talked about listening, and often it seems to me that this government has a habit of selective listening, not fully listening. I know he quoted the president of the SFL, and I would agree with the president of the SFL. And I know on this side, we've all said that we appreciate the increased funding to transition housing. But I know, I know if you looked at the whole quote, I would think there was probably more, there was probably more to that quote than that member added. And I think he probably should check the record. And I know these folks are very good at selective listening, cutting and pasting, and I've been a victim of that as well from that side where they thought that was very interesting, that little piece that I said. And I have to say that they need to do a better job, a better job, a much better job of that.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'll speak for a bit here, but I do want to make sure that if there's any confusion, yes I will be voting against this budget. This budget has serious fatal flaws in it. While containing some good pieces, there are fatal flaws in it, and I will highlight those. And I will be speaking in favour of the amendment, and that is:

That all the words "That the Assembly" be deleted and the following be added:

disagrees with the government for tabling a credit card budget that pushes costs on future generations, hurts health care, fails students and schools, rolls back the clock on environment progress, denies transparency, and relies on short-sighted privatization schemes.

And, Mr. Speaker, I think that covers it really well. And I'll highlight what I mean by some of those areas of concern because I think this government has really produced a credit card budget. I know these folks obsess on the balanced budget and probably, in the next week or two, we'll probably see billboards go up and advertising go up even though just a few short weeks ago, a few short weeks ago, they spent over \$90,000 telling people, be ready for a tight budget, that this will be a very tight budget. There's not much money to go around. And they spent \$90,000 doing that, and they also fixed up the Premier's office, putting in a hardwood floor of some \$22,000.

So we have some concerns about the mixed messages, the inconsistency of this government when it really counts and really delivering for the people of Saskatchewan, the middle class of this province, the people who have worked hard. The people have worked hard to get this province to where it is. They're not feeling like this budget really delivers for them. And so I'll speak about those kind of things. And I think that's very, very important, you know.

Mr. Speaker, from my riding in Saskatoon Centre, it's obviously probably the most urban riding in the province. I think it covers about 3 square miles. It's essentially between 0th Street and 29th Street. Yes it's very. . . nine blocks wide and about 27 blocks long. And it's something I can walk in the morning. And I know that not many can say that.

But I can tell you that when you start to talk about going up the stairs in the apartment

blocks, the miles start to add on, you know. But the whole wide range of people who live in that riding, those who are in the most vulnerable situation, low-income workers, those who are on the SAID program, those who are recent immigrants, new Canadians that have moved to the province because they are thinking this is the place where there will be opportunity . . . And we sure hope there are. We think there is.

But there's problems. There's difficulties with the kind of things that they have come to expect. And so, Mr. Speaker, on one end of the continuum we have that situation. We have a strong, strong middle class out in Mount Royal, Caswell, parts of Riversdale, Westmount, in those areas and downtown. We also have a lot of seniors who live downtown and throughout the riding actually.

So they're watching this very closely, to what happens to them and what are the concerns that they find and what are they looking for when it comes to a provincial government and what a provincial government should be doing for them.

And so I can speak from a point of real diversity in my community. And of course downtown as well, along Spadina, I can tell you that in the condos there, there are some people who enjoy very well-paying jobs and are there. And we sure appreciate the fact that they're there and they're contributing to the economy. And they do very much add to the value of our economy through their expertise and what they can offer in the workplace.

But it is a wide range of people who live in my riding. It's not a homogeneous type of situation at all. In fact it's so diverse. And sometimes I feel, when you're walking down 20th Street or walking down Spadina, you can be in two different worlds, but it's one riding. And I appreciate that; it keeps me grounded. But it's a challenge that I think this province has, and it reflects that challenge very much.

As well, Mr. Speaker, I have three high schools in my riding and numerous elementary schools, and clearly they're feeling some of the challenges as well. And I know for example Mount Royal is a wonderful example of the kind of changes that we foresaw that would need the help in this province when we were in government because it really became a SIAST west, a module of SIAST being able to deliver skills training to students right in, very close to their homes. And it's worked out to be a very, very good model. So we're really, really proud of that.

And of course we are also home to Station 20 West, the new community hub on 20th Street that just opened last fall. And the kind of work that's happening out of there, it's so exciting to support community people, both in the services they need and to make sure that they get those services — whether it be health care, help with their children, nutrition, all those kind of things. So it's very, very important.

So the kind of issues that this government's putting forward are very relevant to the folks in my riding. And so when we take a look at a budget like this, they want to make sure it's the very best that it can possibly be, that it's transparent, that it meets the needs of our citizens. And that's why we have a real problem with some of the things in it.

As we said, some of the things like the Linkin, that's very solid. We had called for that, that's important.

The transition house support, very important. That's very good. My only caveat with that would be that somehow we have to address the issue of somehow a strategy that stops the type of domestic abuse that leads to that. And I would like to see the government take a stronger role in that.

But we see a credit card budget in front of us. And we worry about that because what we're really doing is, as we've described, kicking the can down the road for our young people, for the next generation to pay for the bills. And this just isn't on. We know this government obsesses about the idea, the concept of balanced budgets, and we should all strive for that. But when a budget's delivered, it is the budget. We see several examples of where already the Premier and the government's signalling that they have flexibility, and that this really isn't quite what it seems to be.

We heard on the Thursday morning last week where the Premier was speculating about changes or increases to education funding to meet the needs of our crowded classrooms because they did it last year. Just seems to be a habit of what they do mid-year, and that shouldn't happen. That shouldn't happen. This is about good planning. This is about good planning.

And we know this government is not above asking the Crowns to deliver more funds through a dividend, special dividends, that when the going gets tough they will rely on them. And that puts our Crowns in a very difficult situation. So that's why we have a problem with them calling this a balanced budget when we already start to see holes in the budget, the holes in the budget.

And we've talked about flooding today. Where is that? We see the crop insurance start thinking along the lines of what the problems they can anticipate in the fall but not so much with flooding. We know this is going to be a big problem. I think we can probably say definitively that this is going to be a problem. Every day that it keeps cool like the days we've had in the last several weeks means that we're going to probably have significant flooding. And for this government to deny that, I think, is really problematic, but they've kept to their balanced budget concept.

So we have a real problem with this. And I've not heard any of the previous members acknowledge the fact that in their budget documents they've talked about increasing the debt — increasing the debt by \$850 million. They're strangely silent on that. Who's going to pay for that?

And then they have this idea, this P3 idea. And we have a lot of legitimate questions about that because clearly that's pushing debt further down the road. We need to know a lot more about that. And I think when you spend the kind of money that they're talking about on P3s when they've already spent \$1 million just a few short years ago deciding not to go down that road. All of a sudden now there are deciding to go down that road. We have some real, real concerns.

So we think they're ill-prepared for this. And it's going to let our kids down because they end up having to pay for it, and we have some strong questions about it. Now, Mr. Speaker, I was very concerned when I heard the amount of money that was raised when it came to education support. Clearly, clearly that is an area that when we have people come to our province, they look at our education system. And we believe that it's second to none, that it's an excellent system. All systems can improve. And I think that when we talk to people in the schools and our school systems, they say, yes we can do better. We can do better. But we think it's second to none. We think we've produced some outstanding students in our province.

Unfortunately though, we see challenges though that we have to do better. And we have do particularly better around the Aboriginal graduation rates. That's something that we can do, that we need to do. And we see that commitment just not in this budget. We don't see the commitment to the Aboriginal students in our communities, and that's left just out there with a big question mark and not very much support, not very much support at all. And we're also seeing real challenges where we have a government that's willing to intervene where they've not gone before but where they're willing to intervene.

And the number of minutes . . . We've seen the minister go that he wants specific minutes for subjects per day in our classrooms. He's willing to go that far. He's willing to say, when does the school year start? Right after Labour Day. But he's not willing to say what a maximum number of kids in a classroom should be. He's not willing to have that conversation at all. And we find that strange. We find that really passing the buck, if you will. We think that there should be a discussion about that because we've seen and we've heard stories about classrooms are crowded and that we need better supports. And we need to figure out how to do this. And they've made a commitment that we understand it's up to 40 portables that they're willing to provide.

Now by their own numbers, Mr. Speaker, they talk about 4,500 new students in our schools. I think it was 2,300 this year, 1,200 the year before. That's great. Good to see the increases — 4,500 new students, 40 classrooms. It sounds like we do have a class size here. It sounds like the math on that is about 115 kids that they're willing to put into a classroom. We just don't think that's . . . That doesn't make any sense. That doesn't make any sense at all.

And so, Mr. Speaker, when they put out these kind of numbers, we have a lot of questions. And I can understand why other people would have questions about that. Now they love to read, and they will get up and they will read other quotes. And this is what the Saskatchewan School Boards Association says, and I quote:

Today's provincial budget represents at best "status quo" for boards of education in Saskatchewan.

"As a result of the government's decision to fully fund pre-K to 12 education in Saskatchewan, school boards are on a fixed income determined by the province and individual school boards have little flexibility to respond to challenges within school divisions," said SSBA President Janet Foord.

So this is just something, just one quote. And they're saying essentially their hands are tied. They're seeing their schools' population growing. We all know they're growing, but their hands are tied. They can't do what needs to be done to improve student performance in the schools. They can't do what needs to be done to improve student performance.

So what is this government's, what's this government's response? It's to put in \$6 million for standardized testing, \$6 million for standardized testing. Now we all know and we all think that you do have to have some assessment. Nobody's against assessment. Everybody wants to know how their kids are doing in school. Obviously that's a fact and we all share that. But we also think and we think that people have a sense of priorities, and their priorities are supporting students in the classroom. Parents want to see that their kids are having the best experience, the best learning experience that they possibly can have. And if they're hearing that all this government wants to do is support and provide 40 portable classrooms to deal with these overcrowded classrooms but yet provide \$6 million for standardized testing — and of which that I understand 5.9 million is for computer hardware — it just doesn't, it just doesn't add up.

You know, Mr. Speaker, these folks love to talk about past behaviour predicts future behaviour. We've seen this government where they cut 350 educational assistants and then the minister would get up and say that they've added 19 more. But they cut 350, they've cut 350. They've added 19 more. These things just don't add up. They don't make sense.

And for most families they're saying, we want to see our schools supported. We want to see our kids do well. That's number one. And they have faith and confidence in their teachers, and that's really what's really important.

So, Mr. Speaker, we have some real concerns about what's happening with education in this province. And you know, and I have to say as well one of the most important contributions to this debate about education was made last fall when the STF [Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation] talked about poverty in our communities, about the prices that some families are experiencing when it comes to income and nutrition and how that's limiting the ability for their students, for their children to perform in school and to learn. And this is really, really a problem. And so, Mr. Speaker, we need to talk to the STF. We need to talk to the school boards and talk about what really is important in our schools. And that's how we do good planning and that's what we do . . . That's good listening; that's not selective listening that we hear from the other side.

And so, Mr. Speaker, and as well, we need to create in our schools an environment where we're attracting the best to be our teachers. And I think the signals that this government has sent to teachers — whether it's over standardized testing, the last bargaining session they had, all sorts of things, overcrowded classrooms, not willing to have authentic conversations about what's important for students in Saskatchewan — I think we're sending mixed messages to our teachers.

And that's a problem because both parents and teachers are really worried about the future of our schools, when you see a government that is obsessed with standardized

testing, can't really articulate what that means. We're hearing different versions of it almost weekly. But we know what's really important is providing resources that the teachers think are important in those classrooms, and that's just not happening.

Mr. Speaker, I want to take a minute to talk about . . . One of my other critic roles is around labour, and we have not really had a conversation about that. It was not raised at all in the budget speech and it was not even in one of their press releases. So I am waiting to hear from the minister when he gets up and speaks about the implications of Bill 85 in this budget.

You know, last year when this was announced on May 2nd, we were all surprised because it wasn't part of the budget. It wasn't part of the Throne Speech. And you know, Mr. Speaker, when the minister was asked about it, he said, well there would not be a problem. We could just absorb the costs; we could just absorb the costs. And the fact of the matter is they couldn't absorb the costs and we had to have supplementary estimates last fall, last November, where . . . Actually it was early December when it came to committee, where the minister did acknowledge that in fact he was incorrect. He was out by \$700,000, and that was up to November 28th. That was what the budget line was, or the overspent on Bill 85. And I don't know what happened in the other four months, December, January, February, and March. He could have hit \$1 million on doing the work for that bill.

But the fact of the matter is they were ill-prepared, ill-planned, and to start that process. But the minister said not to worry, that he was going to make sure everything was all right, and that it would work out in the end.

Now we look at this, the new budget, and we have the same, the very same concerns. Here you have the biggest rewrite of labour laws in this province in 100 years and nothing special for it, nothing special for it. This reminds me so much of the essential services bill, and the fact that they had said at that time it wasn't going to cost any money, but here we are, five years later, mired down in court over this. This has got to be costing the government something, if not because they've had to make some decisions about not do this because we have to still deal with the essential services legislation. Those are choices. Those are choices. And we have a choice of what to do with Bill 85. And you know every day, Mr. Speaker, I get up and I raise a petition . . . We're not saying well . . . We're saying, delay it. We understand the government has the majority, and they will have their way. But let's get it right so we're not ending up in court all the time, that we're not ending up in court.

I have personally some real problems with the bill. I don't think it's well-thought-out and of course when the bill comes forward, we'll have that vote. But, Mr. Speaker, I have some real concerns that this, this bill when it's passed — and this government has said it will pass this spring — what the implications of that are and what the implications are for the labour bill or labour budget.

So when I look at the estimates here, I see that it's going up about \$1 million. It's going from 17.4 million up to 18.4 million. And we can talk about where we see the big

difference is. We see that central management gets 300,000. We see that essentially labour standards gets about 50,000 more dollars. I'm not sure if that's just the cost of doing business, if there's anything special in there. Labour Relations Board gets 15,000 more. The labour relations and mediation — and this is going to be a big one when you're changing around The Trade Union Act — it goes up by \$13,000, and worker's advocate goes up by 12,000.

Now the biggest one goes up and this, this may be good, and I'm interested in hearing more about this and I hope the minister tells us about this, but occupational health and safety goes up about, I would say that's about \$900,000. It goes from 7.6 million to 8.5. So that's significant and that may be good. I'm curious to know why that's going up so much. Now people might say, well that's good because we're having more occupational health and safety inspectors. But here's the catch, Mr. Speaker. They're going up from 147 FTEs [full-time equivalent] to 149. So they're going up two people. That's not \$900,000. That's not 900. So where's that money going? What's it doing in occupational health and safety? Clearly a priority of the government and we share that priority. When it comes to safety in our workplaces, it's got to happen. We don't know what that is. There was no budget announcement. Nobody said that they're doing this, they're doing that, they're doing what. We don't know what's happening to money in occupational health and safety. So we're anxiously awaiting that.

But, Mr. Speaker, the implementation of Bill 85 is going to be huge. It's going to be huge. A few weeks ago, we had a labour forum at the U of S [University of Saskatchewan] at the College of Law, actually at the business college there. Myself and the minister were there and we had a very good, frank, full discussion about Bill 85. One of the points that was made, one of the points that was made was implementation. When you do this kind of bill, when you do this kind of omnibus bill, you just can't let it go out there with no support. That's crazy. And we're looking at, you know, the way it's written now with so much ambiguity and we're not seeing the regulations. It's going to be a real piecemeal implementation. So we have some real, real concerns about how that's going to play out.

And so when I look at Labour Relations and Workplace Safety, I have a lot of questions, a lot of questions. And this is going to affect a lot of people over the next while. And how are they planning to put in place Bill 85 because, as I said and these folks like to say it, past behaviour indicates future behaviour? And the Minister of Labour was out by \$700,000, if not more, last year and he's not said anything about the implementation of this bill so I can only gather we're headed for a deficit when it comes to labour relations. And I anxiously await to see what happens with that. And so if they were to do the right thing, postpone the passing of that bill, make sure it's done well and we'd be all on board more or less, then it would be a better situation.

But as I said, it just reminds me of the essential services train wreck that we had, that we continue to have six years later because they didn't think that out and they said that would just go through, no problem. And here we have Bill 85. It's destined to repeat. So I'm really concerned about that.

And, Mr. Speaker, I just also want to say that I do have some concerns that the Minister of Finance has raised this issue around pooled retirement plans. And we have some interest in that. We'll have more discussion.

I do want to raise my concern though that we couldn't have done more and the Minister of Finance couldn't have done more when he had an opportunity at the national federal meetings to advocate for those workers who cannot, for whatever reason, establish a good savings practice and they just don't have a future when it comes to retirement. And that's something that we really, really have to talk about.

So I think that in many ways that's a big picture and we know in Saskatchewan only about 25 per cent of us actually have RSVPs and that many of us don't have government or work pension plans. And so this is going to be a big problem for many, many people.

I want to talk a little bit about housing. And I know that we're anxiously, and I am anxiously awaiting to see the results of all the numbers this government continues to roll out. And they're pretty bold and, you know, last year, Mr. Speaker, I don't know if you remember the announcement when they were going to build 10,000 apartments. We've not heard anything about the 10,000 apartments.

They had this tax credit announcement and we raised concerns because first we asked, where did you get the number 10,000 from? Well they seemed to come out of thin air, 10,000. And in fact these were not rental apartments. They were actually, could be quite legitimately condos that they were establishing. And so we have a problem with that.

But we have a real problem on a couple of fronts. One is that they're selling these 300 affordable homes in Regina and Moose Jaw and they're selling 336 acres of land just outside of Regina here. And I know that actually the closing date is March 31st for the expression of interest on it. And we heard the minister talk about a number, 53 million, last week and when I looked in the budget, there's nothing about 53 million.

And it reminds me of a couple of years ago when the minister just, within 48 hours of the budget being announced, she had a new plan, the five-point plan, that wasn't reflected in the budget. And here we have 53 million and I don't know whether it's in the budget or not and we don't know whether these 300 families, whether there's 300 empty places that they can go to.

Last Thursday when they made this announcement with Deveraux, it sounds very interesting, but they were willing to buy these properties. I think they were for \$206,000 each. The government's doing sort of a switch, but they're selling these houses for 199, 198,000. So essentially the loss to the government is about \$8,000 per unit on these 48. Now if this is the pattern — and again going back to their past practice indicates future practice — here you have a government that's willing to sell their houses for less, and buy high, sell low type of mentality.

Somehow the minister came up with a number of saving \$2 million. We come up with a number that it's costing them \$2 million because if you do 300 times 8,000, that's actually 2.4 million. So, Mr. Speaker, we're not sure of the minister's math on this. And

the way she portrayed it as a savings when it was actually a cost, that's a real problem. So I have a real problem with that.

And, Mr. Speaker, I also want to take a minute to talk a little bit about shelters. And we know, we know for sure, and it is a good thing what they've done in Melfort. That's a worthy, worthy thing. And we appreciate and the folks in Melfort and that area will really be thankful for that.

But we're hearing stories both in Estevan, North Battleford, and in P.A. around shelters. And the thing that's been happening in P.A. has just been tragic where we've had four people die this winter, frozen to death, and it's been really tragic. And we think this is something the government needs to pay attention to. It's a complex issue. It's about housing first, how it's important to have people in shelter every night, particularly when you have winters like we have.

North Battleford's talking about it, when they have people, workers coming through on the Yellowhead and having to stop in North Battleford and no place to stay, no place to stay.

We're hearing the same story in Estevan, you know. And Estevan is quite a unique circumstance because here we have an economy that's firing so strong, but yet housing is a crisis. And the vacancy rate, you know, these folks will say vacancy rates are going up across the province. Several places it's not going up, and one of them is Estevan where in fact it dropped from 1 per cent to point six per cent in the fall. So they have some real challenges. And I know down there they've established a shelter — it's called Warm Welcome, I think is what it is — just to meet the needs. And ironically it meets the needs of many folks right from those who are dealing with severe mental health issues, poverty and that, but also people who have a job but just can't find a place to stay. They need a place to stay so they can go to work the next day.

So we have to do more about that, Mr. Speaker. So we want to get that on the record, that we would expect more. And we would like to see the government step up around the shelters — that has to be addressed — and housing first, right across the province, right across the province because we think that's very, very important.

Mr. Speaker, the government also would like to . . . This is a big deal for people in my riding, and I would often think about the stories where I would hear families actually arguing about how are they going to make ends meet because of the cost of child care. So you may have a space, but the subsidies aren't working. They're not working, Mr. Speaker, and we need to do more to make sure they actually do work. Something's not working here. And you have so many spaces that this government has put there — needs to be more — but ironically in the budget we see that the actual total amount for subsidies has actually gone down. And we can't understand why that would be because we think, from what I'm hearing from our constituents, daycare is pretty, pretty expensive. So we have some real concerns about that, Mr. Speaker.

So you know, and the one issue I do want to say ... And I know the member from Moose

Jaw Wakamow talked about every promise made in the last 2007 campaign. And I do want to bring this one up because I think it's so hugely important that they said and they made a promise that they would reinstate the all-party committee about child exploitation through the sex trade. They have not done that. That was a major promise in 2007, and they have promptly forgotten about that. And we see too many examples of the fact that this continues to be a problem.

And, Mr. Speaker, ironically back when it was first done in the late 1990s, two issues were not a big deal — and you've probably heard me talk about this — but two issues were not a big deal, and was not part of that report. It was the Internet and gangs. And that's a reality of too many of our communities, and we have to do something about that.

So, Mr. Speaker, to sum up, as I said I have too many concerns in my areas of critic responsibilities that we need to see more done around education. We think the government's dropping the ball big time on education. They're going down the wrong path dealing with standardized testing when we should be dealing with overcrowded classrooms. That's really important, especially English as a second language. That kind of support has to be there. We have to do more to provide for our schools so parents have confidence that their children are learning.

Housing, we're seeing a shell game here. We're waiting to see what actually happens. This government is very good at churning out press releases and new numbers and the amount it's spending, but we're just seeing too many gaps in the housing in our communities — high rents, high rents, or no place available. And that's a problem both for workers, seniors, youth, those who are very vulnerable, who need a place to stay.

So we have some problems. And I said too about the labour relations, the fact that this minister miscalculated last year on his budget by over \$700,000. And we seem to be going down that path yet again, yet again, and so I have some real concerns about that.

So I would agree with my colleagues over here, the critic for Finance, when he talks about this being a credit card budget. We see debt increasing by \$850 million. And we see a dangerous plan of P3s that we don't know what that really means. And the minister responsible seems to be caught in an ideological loop on this, not giving straight answers. So we have some real concerns.

So, Mr. Speaker, I'll be supporting the amendment but not the budget. Thank you.

