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DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

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Budget Debate

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It's a pleasure and I know I get a chance to speak before, but after supper. But one thing I haven't heard from these folks when talking about the budget is the three new MLAs that they insisted on having put forward for the next election. Now they're talking a lot about history. They're talking about a lot of history but they don't want to talk about the three new MLAs. We have not heard them talk about the smart meter fiasco, and we have not heard them talk about John Black. All of a sudden that part of history is erased from Saskatchewan.

We need to talk more about those three new MLAs and what value they really have for Saskatchewan families in Saskatchewan today. We need to talk about John Black and the consultants — 228 per cent increase, Mr. Deputy Speaker. How are they adding value for Saskatchewan families?

So I'll have a lot more to say about this after supper, Mr. Speaker, because I know you're going to cut me off in a few minutes. But people can tune back in, tune back at 7 o'clock because I'll have some things to say about this budget, for sure, for sure.

These folks like to gloss over what this budget, this borrowed balanced budget really means to Saskatchewan families in Saskatchewan today. It's not a good thing. It's not a good thing and whether we talk about the child care supplements, the subsidies that have been cut back, seniors thrown off the pharmacare, all of these things is not a good thing, Mr. Speaker. So come back at 7 o'clock and I'll have more to say.

The Deputy Speaker: It now being 5 o'clock, this House stands recessed until 7 p.m. tonight.

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise and enter into the debate on the budget for the 2015-16 fiscal year here in Saskatchewan. It's an important time in our province as we've seen such a growth but some challenges as well. Yet we are doing well as a province, and we see that in terms of the revenues the

province is gathering.

As I said just moments before 5 o'clock, I do have some comments to make. And I think there are really salient points about what this government has done to show its priorities and where its heart really, really lies. And I feel that, as I was talking about just prior to that, and I'll go into my main speech, but I think actually there was an editorial in the *Leader-Post* on the weekend that really summarizes what this term has been and how we started out, just three short years ago when we were talking about boundaries and redistribution of the new electoral districts here in Saskatchewan, and this government rammed ahead with three new MLAs [Member of the Legislative Assembly], bringing our total to 61.

And it was a choice, it was a choice that they had made. And they would have known at the time, they would have known that, is this a sustainable thing to do? Is this a sustainable thing to do? Because when you do this, when you say we're going to move from 58 seats to 61 seats, there are costs involved. And you better make sure it's worth it, that it's worth it particularly in Saskatchewan, because when we talk about Manitoba and Alberta, in fact the rest of Canada, we are highly governed, over-governed particularly at the provincial level.

And I just want to read parts of this editorial because I think it really shows where this government is at with its misplaced priorities and its pet projects. And unfortunately for the families and seniors of Saskatchewan, they're paying a price for it. And this government won't back down, won't back down when they know they are dead wrong. They just steam ahead. We see that with the John Black consultant getting \$40 million in his gravy plane. And this government, while it reduced the contract by a few short months, essentially plowed ahead no matter what. And we have, as an opposition, brought into the House many examples in the health area of how it's really gone off the rails, really gone off the rails.

And this government will pour out its stats and pour out its speaking points but refuses to acknowledge what's happening to families and seniors and young people in this province. And it's those people who are truly paying the price for this government's obsession with its pet projects. Whether it's the smart meters or whether it's limousines in London or whether it's 228 per cent increase in consultants, it really doesn't matter. This government just won't back down.

But this is what this editorial says:

Given the elimination of "non-essential" government hiring and a pay freeze for politicians, it's curious that Premier Brad Wall's government has overlooked an easy and completely painless budget cut — axing plans to add three MLAs in next year's provincial election.

At close to \$700,000 a year in salaries, benefits and expenses, this is not chump change. Indeed, scrapping the new MLA plan would have gone a long way toward enabling Finance Minister Ken Krawetz to withdraw a painful measure in

his 2015-16 budget.

It goes on to say, and I quote:

To save just \$1 million a year, the Saskatchewan Employment Supplement for low-income families will only be available to future applicants with children 12 and under, instead of up to 18 years of age.

The supplement helps the recipients with the cost of raising a family and transitioning from social assistance into the labour force. And as some critics have rightly observed, children don't get any cheaper to raise once they become teens — indeed the reverse is likely true as their food and clothing costs rise . . .

It goes on to remark that we have 58 MLAs already. Manitoba, with 157,000 more people, have fewer seats. And clearly right across Canada, you can talk about Newfoundland where I think they rolled it back by 10. They rolled it back by 10 MLAs. But this shows, this demonstrates where this government is at when it's got a pet project it's going to ram through, and it really doesn't, really doesn't care.

So, Mr. Speaker, obviously this budget is hurting families here in Saskatchewan and seniors. And this is only the start. We see the list of broken promises, the list of broken promises from this government, whether it's the active family benefit that's now being cut back; the senior drug plan that they've now cut twice, twice in eight years they've rolled that back; the student graduate retention program and what they've done there.

And of course the rainy day fund, the rainy day fund that had one time \$1.4 billion in it but now, in spite of record revenues, on how this government cannot control its appetite for spending, cannot control its appetite for spending, is now down to 200 million, \$200 million. So it really begs the question of where did the money go? And it's interesting when these folks over here talk about that, they like to start to answer that question but they never can quite finish it. They never can quite finish it.

And what's interesting, and I will say this, Mr. Speaker, it will be very interesting in the speeches we hear this week. And we've heard it so far or I haven't heard it, and I think this may be the cause of the problem over there. These folks have a problem counting. They have a problem counting, and it's a problem by counting by tens. Quite often what I'll hear over here is they'll go 70's and then somehow they skip the 80's. And then we land at the 90's. You know they can count by 10: 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70. What happened to 80? What happened to the '80s? What happened ... [inaudible interjection] . . . Oh, some of them say they were in high school so they're not, that they don't remember. What happened to the '90s? What happened to the '90s? But they love to go and talk about the '90s, but they go hand in hand, Mr. Speaker.

And I mean, they've woken up on this one. They forget all about the '80s. And I will say this: I will be very interested if any of them over there talk about the '80s in their speeches this week. They won't talk about that, and that's why we have a problem with this borrowed balanced budget because they can't get their math quite right. They have forgotten all of it. It's like they have collective amnesia, Mr. Speaker, collective amnesia.

Nobody over there remembers the '80s. You know, and I just find that passing strange.

They will remember the '70s. I heard the member from Lloydminster going on quite eloquently about the '70s and then went on about the '90s. But what happened to the '80s? I want to know, what about the '80s?

So I'll be listening. And I know the Minister of Education is getting warmed up here, and maybe he's on tonight. He will tell us about the '80s. Because you know what's really odd? Some of them will say, I was in high school, but I know at least two of them were involved in the government in the '80s. Which two were they? Now there were at least two, and maybe it's a bad thing to talk about the '80s, but there's at least two of them that were very intimately connected with the government of the day of the '80s.

I mean, I'll leave that with the folks over there. And they'll get their speaking notes tomorrow about the '80s, and then we'll hear about that. But I bet tonight we won't hear a single thing about the '80s. They will go '70s, '90s, and I think that's a reason why we have a problem with the math over there.

Mr. Speaker, this really is not a good budget for the people of Saskatchewan. As I've said, there's all sorts of cuts. They've talked about how there hasn't been a tax increase. I don't know if PotashCorp of Saskatchewan would agree with that interpretation, and their stakeholders. And we saw that Friday morning they didn't come back with a vote of confidence in the budget of the day. In fact they know over there what happened with the stocks on Friday morning.

Mr. Speaker, when they talk about balancing their budget, but yet they have to borrow to balance the budget, this is really something that leaves a lot of questions in people's minds. But I really want to talk about a couple of areas that are very important to me, because as critic I have to raise those issues, and one is about the disability strategy. And we were hoping that to see in the budget some placeholder of the money that's been set aside for the disability strategy, some recognition that there was going to be a significant investment in that strategy for folks who are living with disabilities because the government has made a lot of press about how they're doing the right thing. But we haven't heard a thing about that.

I am also really worried about what's happening in income assistance programs. And I'm really talking about social assistance; TEA [transitional employment allowance], the employment program, and SAID [Saskatchewan assured income for disability]. And, Mr. Speaker, you know it's interesting, it's interesting what's happening. And I do want to thank the minister for actually answering the questions. Last fall they didn't answer the questions, and we did get answers to this set of questions. Today I didn't get an answer to some of my written questions, and I'll talk more about that.

But interesting, interesting here, Mr. Speaker, the caseload for SAP [Saskatchewan assistance plan], TEA, and SAID at the end of February was 30,431 — over 30,000 almost 30,400 over, over that. When they took office, the caseload for income security programs was 25,998. That's 26,000. What we've seen since they've taken over in

government is an increase of over 4,443 cases when it comes to SAP, SAID, and TEA. That's an increase, Mr. Speaker, of 17 per cent, a 17 per cent increase in families who are on SAID, SAP, or TEA. How can that be? How can that be when we've seen such a strong economy in our province in the last eight years? How can that be, a 17 per cent increase?

Well I have to say that we were pleasantly surprised in the Throne Speech when this government announced that they were looking at and they announced a poverty reduction strategy, that they were going to be taking a look at that. After many, many years of denying that that would help, they are now thinking of that.

But interestingly, and I would like to hear more about this from the members opposite when they get up to speak, what is happening with that strategy? Was there money set aside in the budget for that? We've not heard one thing about that, not one thing. The Minister of Finance didn't talk about it. The Premier's not talked about it. None of the people so far have talked about it. No one has talked about their hopes and fears. And yet we've seen, if the numbers they've given me are correct, a 17 per cent increase in the caseload for the Ministry of Social Services since the fall of 2007. That's not a small increase. Seventeen per cent is a significant increase.

So we need that strategy, and we need that strategy to have teeth. We need that strategy to have resources. And we can't wait a year from now to hear more about it, so I am really concerned about that.

Now the other thing I'm very concerned about is in fact around housing. Now of course this government, especially in Sask Housing, some of their announcements just don't make any sense over the last couple of years. And we're getting calls to the office. What does this mean? What does this mean? In their last announcement in January, they were going to do away with affordable housing in the cities, in 12 of the cities in Saskatchewan. And of course this led to a lot of alarm in the tenants, 18,000 tenants who live in Sask Housing units across this province.

Sask Housing has such a great history of meeting the needs of seniors and those people, especially women, who are fleeing from abuse. And those sort of circumstances, social housing really was there to meet the needs of those who really need did the need. But there was also another group, another group about 4,500, 4,000 to 4,500 tenants, using a program called affordable housing which bridged the very low-income people, but usually families, to a situation where they might be able to save some money to either buy a house or get their lives in order so that they could rent a more affordable, private market situation. But now we hear this program is being cancelled, and it really is all social housing now.

And seniors are saying, well what does that mean for us? What does that mean for us? We're seniors. And there's some 11,000 seniors in Sask Housing units. And I really can't wait for estimates here because the Sask Housing folks will really have to justify why they are making this so convoluted for people who really need supports in their housing.

And yet we saw in this budget, in this budget we saw a reduction, a reduction of some \$5.4 million in programming for Sask Housing. You know, it went from 14.6 million down to 9.2 million. How can that be? How can that be? You know, we'd be very curious. The portfolio of Sask Housing at the very least deserves to be kept up, but we see a situation where we have a government here last fall in September walked away from a fixed-price contract with Deveraux. And interestingly Deveraux had just been awarded a project in Prince Albert that had a lot of questions about it, but here we had a situation last September where they were allowed to walk away from a fixed-price contract, you know.

And we've talked about this and how this does not give us any comfort about what's going to happen with P3 [public-private partnership] schools. If they can let Deveraux walk away from a \$10 million contract over \$400,000, what's going to happen with these schools, the P3 schools when they, if they get into a situation of difficulty? So we have some real, real issues with that.

Mr. Speaker, I also have questions about what's happening with child care spaces, but I also have questions about the child care subsidy. Here's a situation, the child care-parent subsidies is now at \$14 million — the lowest it's been since 2006. Now my chart doesn't go before . . . It could be even beyond that. In 2007 it was \$16 million for parents to have subsidies for child care spaces. And in fact this government took it up to 17.5 million, 18 million in 2012-13, and they've cut \$4 million over the last four years out of child care parent subsidies. What's happening there? We know, we know families need this. These are the same families that are counting on the employment supplements, the same families, the 4,500 families who really need support.

So when I say, when I raise the issue around these new MLAs, these three new MLAs and what does that mean for families who are looking at cutbacks, we should be supporting families more with child care subsidies, not less. Not less. And here we are instead going to pet projects. Whether they be limousines in London, whether they be the smart meters, or whether they be John Black and his gravy plane coming up from Washington State or whether they be the new MLAs, we've got a real problem with priorities over there.

And, Mr. Speaker, I also want to talk about, I want to talk about my other area of concern is labour and occupational health and safety. And we were shocked, but we have seen this trend, we have seen this trend going with occupational health and safety — the decrease in inspections. And we raised those questions just awhile ago. We saw a 69 per cent decrease in inspections. So on an average of . . . In 2012 there was an average of 385 inspections. Now we're down to 120, and 94 per cent fewer violation notices. And the minister took notice of that and we're looking forward and we hope to hear about this new business plan.

But we are really concerned when we look at the numbers that back this up, that in fact there has been no increase in occupational health and safety inspectors. And if you think that the workforce . . . And this is a good news story in terms of the workforce has grown, and that's great. More and more people are working in Saskatchewan, but you would

think that that would be the time to have more and more inspectors, more and more inspectors. It would only make sense. It would only make sense. But this government is actually having fewer inspectors and a plan that calls for fewer inspections. That doesn't make sense when we have the kind of sad record we have in terms of injury rates here in Saskatchewan. We're the second-worst in Canada. We've got to do better.

And I think one thing, if I could say to the minister right now, is go to WCB [Workers' Compensation Board], ask them for more funds for occupational health and safety. And this is the thing, this is the thing, that it actually doesn't cost the General Revenue Fund. It doesn't cost taxpayers any more money for occupational health and safety because it is funded, as the minister knows, by workers' comp. It's funded by WCB. And so that is a straight correlation between the two. It has no impact on taxes or any other source of revenue. It would have no impact.

So it would only be reasonable to say, we have more workers. More premiums are being paid for workers. Those workers deserve to have more inspectors. It only makes sense. I don't have the number with me, but I think — and the minister can correct me; I know his staff will review my notes tonight or tomorrow — but I think the workforce has grown by about 20 per cent. If it's fewer, they can correct me. But I think we need more occupational health and safety inspectors, and that's something that we'll be talking about in estimates. It's just got to be addressed. It's just simply got to be addressed.

And, Mr. Speaker, I think that we see a slippery slope when we see the ministry focusing on, and we raised this in estimates last year, about the fact that now you don't have to file minutes. It's a slippery slope when you start to not having to file minutes. You start not having to have meetings and, before you know it, it's not nearly as good a shape as it should be.

Mr. Speaker, our time goes by very quickly, and I want to say that it is a pleasure to hear and I want to hear from all sides about what's really happening in Saskatchewan. But I've got to tell you, this doesn't make sense for Saskatchewan families. It's not family friendly. I see the things and, you know, we are very proud of some of the initiatives that we've talked about, whether it's buy local, and we were happy to see the House fully endorse that, and we've talked about that in committee. Transparency and procurement, we have to wait and see where this government goes with that. Hopefully they'll endorse that plan. We know with buy local, they came in and in one of our debates, they were full dead against it, full dead against it. And I'm glad to see that they came on board with that.

I do want to say this. It's why I have to make a pitch about education funding. It will be interesting when I raise with the school boards in Saskatoon that they saw a 4.5 per cent increase. That was the number that was given out earlier today by folks, that that's what the school boards could be expecting. I don't know if we're going to get that in Saskatoon. We'll see.

The minister will go through a long list of schools that he's seen improvements. One that I am still waiting to hear about is asbestos removal in Pleasant Hill. Pleasant Hill School

has been on that list for a long, long time, and I know the minister is very familiar with that school. It's a shame that a school that's now over 100 years old, very important in the inner city of Saskatoon, but it does have an asbestos issue. And I'm looking forward to seeing some address with that.

So with that, Mr. Speaker, I will be supporting the amendment. I think this government, while it's increased spending to record levels, full of waste, and failed to deliver opportunities to young people, fairness and affordability for families, and dignity and security for seniors. So I have to support the amendment; I will not be supporting the main motion. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.