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DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

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Budget Speech

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to enter into the 2014 budget speech. And I have been finding it very interesting listening to the government side defend this budget. And really in many ways, so many ways it's indefensible, and we'll get into that over the next little bit.

But I have to tell you that I have some deep concerns, and I know the people I represent and, as I travel around, people have some real concerns, the concerns that we've outlined and talked a lot about in question period about the cash cow contracts that are going out, the \$40 million. How is that defensible? And I agree with the other side that \$40 million is not a crumb. That is not a crumb. That is something pretty special, that John Black in Washington would think is not a crumb. In fact that's pretty rich cake, isn't it? That's pretty rich cake.

Unfortunately the people here in Saskatchewan don't feel the same largesse from this government. You're giving \$40 million to some consultant and Japanese sensei \$3,500 a day, and we're getting people asking, how can I be one of those consultants? I'd love to get a job with this government that pays \$3,500 a day. The member in the back is saying the same thing. How can I get this job? How can I get this job? So you wonder why we say crumbs. Because people are feeling like that. People are feeling like that.

So, Mr. Speaker, I know this is an opportune time to thank my constituents. You know, I've had the pleasure of serving Centre for several years now, and they have come in and raised concerns and they keep me focused on what's really important, what's really important for the people of this province, the people that are here now but also for future generations, that we don't do things that, whether it's financial or whether it's through the environment, put our futures at risk. So I want to take a minute and thank my constituents.

I also want to take a moment and thank my constituency assistant, Erica Spracklin who's

doing a fantastic job. She's been with me now for a while. But she really has captured the essence of what a constituent assistant does, and it's so important that they're there to hear the concerns, the hopes, and worries of our constituents. And as a constituency assistant, she's done a fantastic job and I'm so glad that I've got her. And I know constituency assistants across both sides really do so much, but I really do feel I'm very fortunate.

I want to thank also my executive and people who really talk to me about the issues at hand, and my own family and my wife. And you know, it's not easy being an MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly]. We're often called on to do different things at different . . . And you know, these days can turn into long evenings and so it takes a lot of patience. And over the course of time, she has shown so much grace in that support so I also want to thank her.

But, Mr. Speaker, I do want to say that this message that this budget sends to everyday families is one to brace themselves. And the Premier sent that out early in the new year when he was raising flags or flying trial balloons about different types of taxes that we might have. I think that's really unfortunate when you do that just to test the waters.

But I think that that's . . . People had got that message early on that this was not going to be a message for the people, that unfortunately there was going to be a lot of challenges in this budget. And I will get into that as we go forward because I know that people today are working harder than ever before and they deserve a budget that uses, that really uses the strong economy that we have right now to benefit them, and also into the long term, whether it's cost of living and the questions we've raised in the House in terms of what that means in terms of housing, what does that mean in terms of jobs, what does that mean in terms of utilities.

I mean we have a government side that would rather reflect on eight years ago when we were in power rather than talk about the here and now, take a moment to acknowledge challenges that people do face here in Saskatchewan. But that's not what they're really interested in. They're interested in patting themselves on the back and not talking about real issues that people are facing.

And so we would hope that and we think the people of Saskatchewan deserve better hospitals, smaller classrooms, a better cost of living, but that's not the case here in Saskatchewan. In fact when we have one of the strongest, if not the strongest, economies in Saskatchewan, these are the kind of things that we're seeing.

You know, and we see a government that is investing in its pet projects, i.e., the lean project, that is now . . . And it's hard to get a sense from this government what the overall cost is. They tend to want to deflect this, and they tend to . . . And they go strong on this. They say if you have the audacity to even question, to say how can we do this better, that's a problem because you're not stepping up the line to support their latest pet project, lean. And we have some real concerns about that. And it's not just us. And we've heard from the nurses who talk about this just-in-time health care where it really should be about just-in-case. And I think that's the way that we should be approaching this. And so

we have some real, real concerns about that.

And so what we see, and we see some of the concerns that have been written in the paper, and I think that . . . Now we haven't heard the government on the other side talk about what was written in The StarPhoenix on the weekend. You know, they love to quote the paper when it's going their way. When it's not, it's not in existence.

So, Mr. Speaker, I would like to read from the editorial on Saturday, March 22nd, The StarPhoenix. And this is what The StarPhoenix opinion says, "Our seniors deserve better." When Health minister . . . and I quote:

When Health Minister Dustin Duncan said he was angry at what he called "dismaying" and "heartbreaking" conditions at Saskatchewan's long-term care homes and quickly announced a \$10 million "urgent issues action fund" in October, the expectation was that the March budget would commit to addressing the problems identified.

However, sometime between Mr. Duncan's reaction to the findings of "unhygienic, unsafe and unacceptable" conditions at the seniors' homes by health region CEOs who toured the facilities and when the government presented its 2014-15 budget this week, it appears that the issue has been moved well down the priority list.

Now we're not saying this on the other side. This is The StarPhoenix. This is The StarPhoenix who's saying, you know, really? What happened? What happened between the outrage that we're going to get this job done to last week when somehow it slipped off the edge of the desk? It slipped off the edge of the desk. Now they will insist it's not. But to a third party, it sure looks like it. It sure looks like it.

And I agree with the headline. Our seniors do deserve better. They truly do. And so the question is, what happened? What happened between those times when he had that emergency issues report and last week when we got the budget?

Now it goes on, and I quote again:

Now that the budget is here, it's evident that Mr. Duncan's mitigation measures fall far short of the mark, even though there are some relatively small but positive steps taken to support seniors living in their . . . homes longer.

As for the long-term plans, there's little indication that measures are being contemplated to accommodate the influx of boomers who will begin to place greater demands on Saskatchewan's aging, and in some cases decrepit, care facilities in the not too distant future.

So, Mr. Speaker, you know, if it makes sense, we are there say, right on. And these people will say . . . And what happened in the budget speech when the government was forced to move to one set of books, one set of books, we acknowledge that. We acknowledge that. So there are some things to acknowledge.

But here you have to say, now will they deny what these people are saying at The StarPhoenix? Will they say no, that's not true; you've got it all wrong? And this is the question we have. We have the minister just before us say, it's the best budget in the nation, best budget in the nation. Now really, really, how can you say that? How can you really say that when you're getting editorials like that? A little humbleness would go a bit of a long way here. But what we get is arrogance and people saying, you guys, it's not crumbs; it's cake and you should be happy with it. Well people are saying, you know what? Really that's not the case.

And here I want to take a moment, and this is one that we've been talking about and I've been talking about for quite a while, and the minister and the former minister of Social Services will know this, when they introduced the increases in the senior income plan, and it's in the record, that I thought that was a good thing. That was a good thing. And good on government when they do good things.

But the question is, and this is the problem, that program has some significant problems, and we've asked about them correcting this. We've asked them to correct this problem because as you look at what's happening in the budget as it is today . . . And they will go on about SIP [seniors' income plan] and how much more money it is. And this year it's 25 million, 25.9 million. But do the folks over there know what it was last year? What was it last year? Anybody know? It was 27 million.

So how can it be, when you're increasing the payments, that it's actually going down? Well this is what's happened. This is what's happening. This is what's happening, Mr. Speaker. At its peak in 2009, in June of 2009, there was 18,600 members or people taking SIP. That's a good thing. That's a good thing. What is it today? According to the written answers we got last week, it's 15,437. Three thousand fewer seniors are getting that program. Now why is that, Mr. Speaker? Why is that? So that's the question before us. That's the question before us. This is a program that needs to be managed right. Now they will get outraged. And I just want to hear what the Minister of Social Services has to say. If she speaks loud enough, we'll get it on the record. What is it?

Mr. Speaker, this is what happens. This is what happens every July. This is what happens every July to the seniors. This is what happens every July. Do you know this, Mr. Speaker? On average, every . . .

An Hon. Member: We income test.

Mr. Forbes: She's saying it's income tested. I'll ask about that because this is what happens every July. Almost 2,000 seniors are thrown off. They're thrown off, aren't they? So this is what's happening. You have 56, 66, somewhere less than 100 seniors are falling off. They get on the program, and all of a sudden they're off the program. So what's happening is this program ... [inaudible interjection] ... Oh this is seniors making too much money. This is a problem. Seniors are making too much money. So we see a program where you have over 3,000 seniors since 2009 thrown off the program because they're making too much money.

This is really interesting to hear from the Minister of Social Services. And we'll have questions, I'm sure, in estimates where she gets to talk about, why is it that seniors who get hope . . . Now they will talk about how they knock on doors, they knock on the doors and seniors are loving this program — except for the day you get thrown off, the day you get thrown off. And we see that day every July where 2,000 seniors will be thrown off the program.

So, Mr. Speaker, is this program well run? No, it isn't. Something's happening that all of . . . Why is it that we had that shock? Something is wrong. Something is wrong. So I don't think these folks know what's really going on. They are all up and they say this is the greatest program, but it's not quite right.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I also have to take a moment and talk a bit about this editorial which I found very interesting in The StarPhoenix. And I appreciate that the minister in her remarks yesterday talked about who she met in terms of the poverty costs reduction strategy, and I'm glad that she met with them. I don't know. When I read her remarks, it didn't sound like a commitment to actually do anything. She talked about how they had a catchy phrase. It had a catchy slogan. But nothing, no commitments to actually dealing with poverty here in Saskatchewan.

And this is what The StarPhoenix had to write on March 15th, 2014: "Ideology beats sound policy." And I find that interesting because here is a government that really is bound by its ideology and not about policy that makes a lot of sense, not a lot of sense. So this is what they say, and I quote, Mr. Speaker:

What at first glance may seem to be a couple of disparate news items identify a larger issue of the provincial government allowing ideology to impede sound public policy that would save taxpayers money over the long term.

Mr. Speaker, this is very interesting because they're talking about how they're committed to saving money through the lean program, some 40 . . . and how they will do anything to save money except if it makes sense, except if it makes sense. Now I'll continue reading. I'll continue the quote. I quote:

The first involves the government reaction to the Cost of Poverty campaign launched by a coalition of Saskatchewan community groups, which notes that poverty ends up costing Saskatchewan's economy \$3.8 billion a year, including \$420 million in health care alone.

And I continue. I quote:

In both cases, the attitude of the government seems to be that the other provinces can heed good advice and get positive results, but Saskatchewan will do its own thing despite evidence that says the government would avoid costly problems down the road by taking action now.

Saskatchewan and British Columbia are now the only provinces without a poverty reduction strategy after Alberta, long the standard bearer for personal

responsibility, recently adopting a comprehensive policy. Yet Social Services Minister June Draude insists that Saskatchewan's growth in average weekly earnings and its low unemployment rate somehow point to a superior anti-poverty strategy in this province where a tenth of the population is impoverished.

So, Mr. Speaker, forgive us if we raise the issue of crumbs where you have a tenth of the province living in poverty and this government refuses to do anything to acknowledge it and then says, when 2,000 seniors a year are thrown off SIP, that's just the way it goes; they're making too much money. Mr. Speaker, we think, we think it's the right thing to ask the tough questions. And if the government is uncomfortable by those questions, they have to live with that because that's what's really going on.

Mr. Speaker, I want to talk a little bit about the rental housing supplement and the federal-provincial affordable housing agreement that now I understand we're getting \$9.2 million a year. And I thought it interesting that the Finance minister stressed, and he was correct in talking about how some of that can be used to pay for supplements.

Mr. Speaker, when this government took power, that supplement cost the provincial government \$6 million a year. This year it's going to cost the government \$38.9 million, \$38.9 million. Now in many ways I think that it was a program we started, and that's a good thing because it makes rental units more affordable. But at some point, somebody's got to say, don't you think \$40 million is an awful lot of money to be paying out?

And we've asked this question. We've asked this question to the minister. And we will ask again. Who actually gets the \$40 million? Is it Sask Housing? Is it Boardwalk? Is it Main Street? What are we doing to really make the best use of that \$40 million? We have some questions on that.

Mr. Speaker, I also have some questions about child care parent subsidies. And I know my colleague will talk a lot about this one, but I have to say I'm amazed at this one. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when this government took power, that fund, the child care parent subsidies, was at \$16 million and what was actually spent was \$15.986 million. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know how much they've allotted this year for it? \$14.675 million, \$1 million less. Now I don't know about you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but in my riding I think people could really use the subsidies for child care. So while this government is celebrating its achievements here, this is the kind of crumbs that we're talking about. These are the kind of crumbs we're talking about.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will remember two years ago when this government announced a program called the corporation income tax rebate on new rental housing. And this was an innovative program in terms of encouraging new builds for apartment units. And of course I had some concerns there because they could be turned into rentals, but this is what they did. Mr. Deputy Speaker, at that time, and I'm reading from the budget documents of 2012-13, the budget summary, page 68. It talks about: "A maximum of 10,000 rental units will qualify for the tax rebate. Eligible units must be constructed and available for rent before the end of 2016." And they had to apply by January 1st, 2014.

Now I asked a question about how many units have come in under this program. How many units? Was it 10,000? Was it 9,000, 5,000, 4,000? 317 units, 317 units. We asked where did they get the number of 10,000 two years ago? And we had an idea that that was going to be a hard mark to reach. But really, they have 10,000? They were talking about 10,000. That what was they were pitching two years ago — and 317.

So if you wonder why we talk about crumbs, that's the reality that people in Saskatchewan are facing. There aren't the apartments. There's the high rent. Not everyone gets the rental supplement. And then the government can't keep track of where the 40 million is going. It's just going out the door. You know, Mr. Speaker, it's really interesting. I don't know. The number 40 million comes up several times, whether it's rental supplement — that's the number from their budget — whether it's J.D. Black and Associates. They're 40 million.

But here's another 40 million. Here's another 40 million. And that's the Linkin system, and the minister referred to it today as one of the things that's going really well in Social Services. And this is from . . . Yes, this is a system and again, you know, if it makes common sense, we're for it. And what we want to do is make sure we keep track and know where the kids in care are, what's happening with them. But we were the last province to have a computerized system, I understand.

Why we couldn't have taken one from another province, or bought one from another province in 2008 or '09, I don't know. But this government was bent on spending money with an Irish software company, and here we are now. And I want to read from December 2nd, 2013, the Human Services Committee, and this is page 581. And I say, and this is my question, and I quote:

So now I have kind of followed this Linkin process, and as I've changed roles in opposition, I think the total bill — and correct me if I'm wrong — but it was approaching \$16 million through the Linkin system? What has been the total cost for Linkin?

Mr. Brown replies, "In terms of the implementation costs?" I say, "No the purchase, the implementation, the whole nine yards."

Mr. Acton, the deputy minister, says, and I quote, "So its total cost is \$37.6 million. That delivers the child and family side, but it also is some foundational work for the income assistance side as well."

I say, "Now is it completely purchased and completely up and running, and we're just dealing with maintenance costs now?"

Well he talks about the child and family side: "We are still doing some work on the financial piece to issue payments, and of course we're just doing some foundational work as it relates to the income assistance side."

So I say, "37 could grow?" Sorry, pardon me. "The 37 million could grow." Mr. Acton said yes.

So we're talking about a \$40 million project, \$40 million project. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is interesting. We have a lot of questions about Linkin, and I was amazed that the minister brought that up as a positive, as a positive. And you know, this is again why people go, I don't know what's happening with this government; it seems to be out of touch. Forty million dollars for lean, \$40 million on the rental supplements so nobody knows where it's going, \$40 million for Linkin. What's the story with that? All right, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have a lot of questions with that.

I want to also take a minute and talk about . . . I know I've been talking a lot about Social Services, and I may go back to that, but I have a lot of questions about Social Services. And people have been talking about the crumbs, and what's been really happening with that. And actually it was good the member from Nutana last night talked about the cuts in Sask Housing, the apparent cuts in Sask Housing. We don't know. The \$9.2 million in transfers from the federal government in their housing agreement, what's really going to happen to that? Is there really going to be some action?

But I want to talk a bit about the Minister of Labour and what he had to say about what's happening with Labour Relations and Workplace Safety. And this is interesting because what he talks about . . . And I was glad to see that he was talking about injuries and the second-highest workplace injury rate in Canada and that we need to do something about it. And I agree with him. It's simply unacceptable. And this is something both the minister and the critic agree, that we need to work on this. This is absolutely an issue that must be resolved.

He talks about seeing a 43 per cent reduction since 2002. But he has talked about increasing the number of workplace inspections and the number of files being sent to Justice and we've increased the maximum dollar of fines. Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this will be a question we have because we know when The Occupational Health and Safety Act was passed a few years ago and then when the employment Act was passed last year, that in fact one of the pieces that was not put into action was the part around the fines. And in fact some of us may remember I had questions about that just a while ago. And while I'm glad to see that the fines are happening — that's a very good thing — we also see that the government has not increased the fines as it said it would. And we have some questions about that. When will that actually happen? And while corporations are being fined I think at a lower level than what they should be, in fact what the legislation calls for, what is the reasoning behind that? And so we'll have a lot of questions about that. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think that we need to do much more work on that.

I am looking forward to seeing the \$100,000 go to continue the high-quality advocacy services for workers' comp. That's very, very important.

So, Mr. Speaker, as I say, this government that's tied to its ideology and not common sense, while we can talk about some of the positives we see in there, they can't see that. They can't see that. It's all great or it's not, and we have some real concerns about that.

So as I said, you know, Mr. Speaker, we were happy to see that there's now only one set of books, but the razor-thin surplus of \$71 million over this size of budget, we'll be

interested to see if they can maintain that or if they can maintain that. We know, for example, there's been no commitment in the budget in terms of the bridge in Saskatoon. And while that may be a year out, it's funny that you can use a budget document to say, this is what we're going to do but we have no money for it. And I know people in Saskatoon are wondering. So what really is the budget really going to be delivering for the people of Saskatoon?

So I think though, Mr. Speaker, what was happening in the past, and we're so glad the Minister of Finance got around to it . . . It reminds me of that saying, something is rotten in Denmark, you know. While these folks over there can say over and over again it's a balanced budget and all of this, but we've never had a failed audit from the auditor. We've never had those flags.

And while they would go on and go on and on and on that it was exactly the same as we did, we knew there were four key differences, four key differences, and that's what the auditor highlighted. It wasn't the same as what it was in the past. So something was rotten. It did not pass the sniff test, and so the consolidation into one set of books is a good thing. The question will be, as we go through this year of transition, how transparent and accountable they will be. I think that's the challenge here and we want to make sure that it is.

So, Mr. Speaker, we know that the budget does call for another \$51 million to be cut from health care. We're really worried about what that really means, particularly when you've got the issue with lean and the kaizen offices and all of that. And the government is not being clear about the total costs. They're saying its cost is with that, with the regional health authority, and not with us.

We know that the budget reannounces 3.7 million already allocated to the issues with seniors' home care. We know that this government continues to plow ahead with a standardized testing regime. We know that the public is not with the government on this. And for some reason this government continues to plow ahead, hard-headed on this, and this is really, really an issue.

And we know our schools are overcrowded. And I was so disappointed to see yesterday that Pleasant Hill School was taken off the list that it's been on for so many years, so many years. So we have a real problem with that. And we heard the speaker before me continue to talk about building schools. And you know the issue that we have with the P3s [public-private partnership]. We continue to raise that. People in our neighbourhoods, in our communities wonder about what's really going to happen there. Are we going to have the Alberta issues that they had in terms of the community control? Are we just renting our schools? Who really owns these schools? And this is a real problem, and so we have some questions about that.

So, Mr. Speaker, we look forward to hearing more about what's going to happen around housing. What are the details of that, the \$9.2 million? Are there any other initiatives? What are they going to do to see more rentals being built? We are looking forward to hearing more about the details. And when we saw that that was released yesterday

afternoon in some form about the \$800,000 and how it's going to play out, we are curious about what's going to happen with human rights.

So, Mr. Speaker, we have some real issues here. And I think that while the government can be offended that we have the audacity to ask questions about it, we will continue to do our job. We will continue to do our job because that's important. That's how democracy works. And I know some folks over there get a little frustrated when they have to do some explaining and they can't just use their slogans. And, Mr. Speaker, it's the way that people expect us to do our work here in Saskatchewan.

And so when we see cuts, we see crumbs for Saskatchewan families and we see, and I've highlighted those issues, whether it's 40 million for Linkin or \$40 million for John Black, people are saying, what about us? What about our schools? What about our seniors? So with that, Mr. Speaker, I will be voting for the amendment. I think that's the only reasonable thing to do. And I will be voting against the main motion. Thank you.