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Membership of Social Services Appeal Board

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of Social Services: does she think it's important for the Social Services Appeal Board to be fully independent and appear to be fully independent?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I do.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, we've had concerns raised with us about this government's approach to the Social Services Appeal Board.

Clark Puckett, the former constituency assistant to the member for Arm River-Watrous and a candidate for the Sask Party nomination in Arm River-Watrous tonight, served on the Social Services Appeal Board for two years while he was a constituency assistant. And we're told that the Social Services minister appointed her own constituency assistant to the Social Services Appeal Board in December.

To the minister: how is this acceptable for constituency assistants to serve on the Social Services Appeal Board?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Mr. Speaker, when we looked at the people who had qualifications, we determined that these people did actually qualify for the job. But then at the same time, we wanted to make sure it was fully independent, so those names were removed. And my assistant is not at any meetings as she's not on the board.

And, Mr. Speaker, our job is to make sure that people who bring concerns to our

government are looked at fully through the eyes of professionals, and we will continue to do that.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We understand when concerns were raised about the Social Services minister appointing her own staff member to the Social Services Appeal Board, the minister did do the right thing and removed her.

But then she did the wrong thing, and she appointed a very close friend of hers to the board instead. And she actually made this friend the Co-Chair of the board, the same close friend who went to Ghana and London with the minister, and the same close friend who had a \$200 lunch with the minister in London. And we've heard a lot of concerns about the minister putting a travel buddy of hers onto the appeal board because that board is supposed to be fully independent from the minister.

To the minister: how can you justify this?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite is well aware of the lunch and that it was not paid for by the taxpayers. That money was repaid.

The people that are on the appeal board are there because they are professional people that have the right background. I think if the member opposite would be looking at the background of the people that were appointed to that board, look at their professionalism and their training and where they've been working for the last number of years, we put people on the boards who will do the right thing when it comes to vulnerable individuals. They'll look at their claims as they come forward. We know the percentage of people that come forward and have their . . . that is actually overturned by the appeal board when looked at through their eyes instead of the ministry. That's the type of work that we look at all the time.

Mr. Speaker, I'm well aware that there are competent people that are friends on this side of the House. And I think there are some competent people from that side of the House, and they've been put on boards as well. Mr. Speaker, we ensure that the work that's being done for the taxpayer of this province is done by competent people.