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DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

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Social Services Expenditures and Responsibilities

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Minister of Social Services said she stayed with a friend while in Ghana. To the minister: why does her expense claim show \$326.08 for accommodations if she was staying with a friend, and will she pay that back to taxpayers?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: There was one night that I stayed in a hotel room when I was in Ghana. The rest of the time, I stayed with a friend. I will not pay that one back because I definitely was working at the convention. I was asked to speak as one of the guest speakers at this conference.

I am proud of the work that we're doing as a government on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. And, Mr. Speaker, I don't make apologies for helping people that need our support in this area.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Social Services also said she didn't go out for any meals while in Ghana. To the minister: why did she bill taxpayers \$389.54 for meals when she says she didn't go out for any meals while she was in Ghana, and will she pay that back to taxpayers?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Draude: Mr. Speaker, I claimed the per diems when I was over there. I had a chance to pay the person that I was staying with. They made the meals. And I had a per diem and I gave it to that individual so that they would ... [inaudible] ... for the food when we were over there. I don't expect my friends to feed me for nothing. And at the same time, I would try and save taxpayers' dollars.

So, Mr. Speaker, this is the answer to the questions. The members opposite can continue on this line if you want to. I am proud of the work that we are doing in this area.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, the minister said she had five or six meetings during the four-day layover she had in London. Despite having just 1.5 meetings per day, she billed the taxpayers to have a limo service at her beck and call. To the minister: did she use that limo service for any sightseeing or shopping with her friend? Is that why she finally agreed to pay back that part of this very expensive trip?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: Mr. Speaker, the expense with respect to the car service was not a part of the ministry's expenses. It was part of an official's expenses that was attending with the minister, and the minister was unaware of the amount. So what she has done is looked at the amount, Mr. Speaker, overnight, looked at the schedule she had, and she's made the determination that another mode of transportation would have been possible. And rather than simply reimburse the difference of what those two modes of transportation might have been, what one was and what one could have been, she just paid all the money back to taxpayers.

Mr. Speaker, the other important point here is that on the way to Ghana, the minister would have had the option, because it's government policy when flights last a certain period of time, to fly business class. She chose to fly economy. She did choose in Ghana to stay with friends, Mr. Speaker. Moreover, last year her travel expenses as a minister, in terms of ministerial travel, were \$28,000.

Mr. Speaker, in the last year of the New Democrats in office, she would have had a lower travel bill than 15 New Democratic ministers. Mr. Speaker, this is a minister who is well reputed in her file and one who has always taken the utmost care with taxpayers' dollars. That's why she has the support of members on this side and people right across the province.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: The minister determined yesterday that nothing personal was paid for by taxpayers, but we know that taxpayers did cover a \$200 lunch with a friend. And now we know that the minister admits that the \$3,600 limo service was also inappropriate. To the minister: how can we trust that taxpayers didn't cover any other personal expenses on this trip?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: Mr. Speaker, with respect to the lunch, it was noted yesterday that this particular invoice or receipt for lunch was at the official's level, not by the minister, incorrectly included with the expenses to be reimbursed and also has since been reimbursed. Mr. Speaker, this was an office mistake that was made.

Again with respect to this particular minister and her own budget for travel, we would happily compare what she has spent in all of her years as a minister of the Crown versus the majority of ministers from the other side of the House, even unadjusted for inflation, Mr. Speaker. What we have seen from this minister is a review overnight of the incident, a review of the facts of the case, and a reimbursement to the taxpayers, Mr. Speaker.

And with respect to the minister's question, which really goes to the integrity of the minister and the veracity of what she is now presenting today and what she also said yesterday in the House and outside on the rotunda and on the public record, Mr. Speaker, again members on this side of the House, colleagues of this minister know the kind of person this is. This is a woman of character. This is a woman of integrity that has served this province in ways that are hard to measure in terms of her professionalism and her contribution. And we stand with the minister today.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, we did not get an answer to the question. Did she use the limo service for any sightseeing or shopping with her friend? Is that why she finally agreed to pay back that part of the very expensive trip?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: Mr. Speaker, travel by ministers of the Saskatchewan Party government is down 50 per cent over travel by NDP [New Democratic Party] ministers in their last year in office. And of course we as MLAs [Member of the Legislative Assembly] also have expenses.

And so I wonder if the hon. member is prepared, the one who is asking the questions is prepared to compare the record of members opposite with how they do their travel. I wonder if he is prepared to claim in this Assembly that every per diem he has taken, there was actually a meal attached to it that he paid for. I don't know the answer, but Mr. Speaker, if this is the questions he's asking of the minister, these are the questions he should be prepared to answer himself.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Again, Mr. Speaker, did she use that limo service for any sightseeing or shopping with her friend? Is that why she finally agreed to pay back the money?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: The money has been paid back already. The minister has agreed to pay back the money, and it's happened with respect to the car service in question.

Let us remember again and put on the record again that this minister had the choice, because of government policy, of flying business class to Ghana. She chose to fly economy. This minister had the option to be in a hotel for the entire duration of the conference at which she was a guest speaker. She chose to stay with acquaintances, Mr.

Speaker.

This minister had a total travel budget last year of \$28,000, less than 15 of the NDP ministers from their last year in office. This minister looks after the taxpayers' dollars as though they were her children's dollars, as though they were the dollars of her family members because, Mr. Speaker, frankly that's been her approach to public life. And it is why today I note, interestingly not just in the Assembly, the people of the province and many of those who have dealt with her in her files in the disability sector, in the area of social services, are today supporting the minister because they know the kind of person that she is.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Will the minister table her complete itinerary and all the receipts for her trip, today?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: Yesterday, Mr. Speaker, the minister, I believe in the scrum, indicated the meetings that she was having while in London with respect to the Social Services file around the disability question, around housing, Mr. Speaker, public housing. And of course the members will know that the minister is also responsible for Sask Housing. She also took a meeting for the Minister of Finance related to financial matters, and I expect a summary of those meetings will be presented today.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Will she table her complete itinerary and all the receipts in the House today? Thank you.

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: Mr. Speaker, I would expect that the response to the FOI [freedom of information] has offered up the expenses involved in the trip. That is the genesis of the nature of these questions and the ones from yesterday in the first place. Moreover I just said to the member and all members in the House that the meetings the minister was attending to on her behalf, in terms of her file and also on behalf of the Minister of Finance, will provided to the public.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, the minister struggled yesterday to explain what she actually learned on this costly trip that is of benefit to Saskatchewan people. What policy changes have occurred or will occur as a result of this minister's trip?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: Well, Mr. Speaker, many, many policies of the Government of

Saskatchewan in the area of social services have changed because of that minister, Mr. Speaker. Many, many policies of the government have changed with respect to housing in this province, as also has been her responsibility over the last number of years, Mr. Speaker, as we have seen a build-out just in public housing, incentives for new home ownership that is related to FIP [Family Income Plan] as we've discussed in this House before, and are seeing new home starts in this province and new home ownership.

Mr. Speaker, changes that have occurred under this minister include SAID, the Saskatchewan assured income for disability, Mr. Speaker, an historic program that recognizes disabilities for what they are, led and championed by this minister and then backs it up with extra resources. Mr. Speaker, because while the social democrats were in office they did a lot of talking about these things. They did a lot of talking about those with disabilities and the supports they needed but they left it at talk, Mr. Speaker. The changes this minister has made is the talk is now action.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Simply, Mr. Speaker, what changed because of this trip?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: Mr. Speaker, I understand the hon. member attended the International Labour Conference in Geneva. I expect he spent taxpayers' dollars to do it. What changed in NDP policy and the policy of the opposition as a result of that trip?

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, why are there no reports for any of her meetings in London or Ghana?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: Will the member table all of his receipts related to the trip to Geneva for the labour conference as well as table all the reports from his attendance at that meeting at taxpayers' expense?

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Again, why are there no reports from her meetings from London or Ghana?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: Mr. Speaker, why are there no reports from this minister's attendance at that very important International Labour Conference in Geneva, Mr. Speaker? Or maybe there are, in which case we should have a look at those.

I know that there were notes taken at some of the meetings. I believe some of them were attached to the FOI, notes that were taken at the meeting and as a result of the conference.

The minister was actually a speaker at the conference in Africa, Mr. Speaker, a keynote speaker. She was asked to present because of the work that she has led here in the province of Saskatchewan.

Sometimes we go to conferences and attend them or go to trade missions with objectives. Sometimes we're asked to present on what we've done in Saskatchewan. The Minister of Finance may well be asked by the federal government or by those involved in the Ukrainian community in this country to be involved in reconstruction, basically, in Ukraine. And if he's asked, we're going to support that he would go, Mr. Speaker, because that's also what we do in the province of Saskatchewan. And that was also a big part of this particular trip.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, will the minister table her presentation at Ghana and the agenda of that convention with her name in it?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: I hope the minister does share her remarks on FASD [fetal alcohol spectrum disorder] that she made there and that she's made around the province so that members opposite might learn a little bit about acting instead of talking about an issue.

And, Mr. Speaker, I'd ask the hon. member to also table his presentation to the International Labour Conference he went to in Geneva at taxpayers' expense, but I bet he wasn't asked to make a presentation.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, this sounds more and more like it was mostly a personal trip to visit friends in Ghana and spend some time in London. Will the minister repay the full expenses to taxpayers today?

The Speaker: I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: Mr. Speaker, this minister has taken one international trip in her seven years in cabinet. And again I would point out, I believe the total amount for travel, ministerial travel, was \$28,000 last year.

Fifteen NDP ministers in the dying days of that government, if you want to talk about entitlement, spent much more than that. In fact it was about a \$1 million bill a year we got in terms of ministerial travel from the NDP. That number's now cut in half, Mr. Speaker. It's been cut in half.

And part of that success story, by the way, is that we have people like the Minister of Social Services at the cabinet table and at our caucus table reminding us always that we are not spending our money. We're spending the money of the taxpayers of the province of Saskatchewan. It's why, it's why . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . No, these are apples .

. . We hear them heckling now, that isn't a fair comparison. It is precisely the same comparison. Fifty per cent more under the NDP, Mr. Speaker — it's why their travel bills were up in office and why they're down to nine members, Mr. Speaker.