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Comments on the Throne Speech

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise today and to offer my comments on the Throne Speech that we heard last week, and of course we do have a lot of concerns.

But before I get into the formal part of my comments, I do want to say some things about my riding, Saskatoon Centre. It's been quite an eventful summer in Saskatoon Centre. You know, it's one of the oldest parts of Saskatoon, and so many of the local organizations and churches and groups are celebrating their centennial. In fact I was very fortunate this year to take part in the St. John's Anglican celebration that they were marking their 100th anniversary, and of course they've had a bit of a time capsule as well.

But you know, one of the things they take the most pride in is of course their church. And many people, if you've walked down Spadina Crescent just down from the Bessborough, it's a beautiful part of Saskatoon. It's a wonderful part. I think a wonderful part of our province, really actually. And many visitors who come to our province stay at the Bessborough, particularly so they can walk along the river and enjoy the architecture. And of course St. John's is right front and centre.

And so, Mr. Speaker, I think that I just want to take a moment and recognize St. John's Anglican for the good work. But I'd also be amiss if I didn't say to the Knox United folks just down the street that's also marking their 100th anniversary this fall, what a great church that is. And we're so proud of our churches in our communities that add that support to us in times of need and times of celebration and times of passing. So I want to say that first.

Our community, Saskatoon Centre, ranges from those who are very well-off to those who are experiencing challenges, experiencing poverty first-hand, and especially experiencing what it's like not to have a grocery store in your neighbourhood and actually having to go

quite a distance. In fact we refer to that often as a food desert. And this year, this fall, just actually just a couple of weeks ago — and I'll be speaking more about this in a member's statement — but we were very fortunate to have the grand opening of the Station 20 West facilities. That really marked how strong our community can be when we believe a social cause is right. And we rallied around in spite of what this government did in the spring of 2008 when it cut the funding to Station 20 West, thought that project was killed. In fact the community rallied and made sure it was strong. And it's in place.

And I was so proud to be at that opening because it really was a community initiative and the community rallied around it and made sure it happened, and it did. And part of that of course is the Good Food Junction, a food co-op which is a great place to go shopping. I try to do a bit there every once in a while and support that because I do believe it's important that we have access to good food in our neighbourhoods, all neighbourhoods. And really this is really, really important.

Well, Mr. Speaker, right off the bat I do want to say that I won't be supporting the main motion but in fact supporting the amendment. Because the other thing about people in my riding is we don't much like surprises from our government. We think when you say something in the Throne Speech, that really is the blueprint that you're going to be going ahead from.

When we saw this from last fall with this government when they came back, some of the things that they were talking about, particularly around the labour legislation review: not announced in the Throne Speech a year ago, but all of a sudden it sprung up in May. The cutting of the film tax credit, which really meant the end of the film industry for Saskatchewan, they don't much like surprises like that. In fact what they really believe in — it's a pretty common saying in Saskatchewan — don't fix things unless they're broke. Don't fix it if it isn't broken. And this government seems really bent on fixing things based on ideology and not common sense. They're driven by ideology, and it's an ideology about corporate interests or big business but not about people in our province. Not about people in our province, and I'm really worried about this and so are many people in my riding.

And in fact it was interesting that it was in my riding that the Premier gave his deluxe version of the Throne Speech a week before. I understand the price was \$100. Now the Premier said, listen, it was free on the Internet. You just had to go on the Internet, if that's where you watched it. That's where the common folks will be watching it. Others will be paying \$100 a plate. That's just not the way we do things in Saskatchewan. We know the way, the place to deliver your Throne Speech is here, here in this House. Here in this House, this is where you start. This is where you start the legislative session, here with a Throne Speech that we hear first.

You know, Mr. Speaker, what I found interesting in the Throne Speech, what I found interesting in the Throne Speech were words that weren't in the Throne Speech that should have been in there, should have been in there. Not a word about poverty. That's something that matters a lot to people in my riding, people right across this province. Not a word about poverty. What are we going to do about that? Not a thing.

Also, and I appreciated that my colleague from Cumberland brought some folks down from the North because not very much in the Throne Speech about the North, particularly around highways which means so much to them.

And, Mr. Speaker, what I found very interesting when they talk about how they're friends of business and the financial community and making things happen in this province, not a word about the co-ops, particularly seeing this is the international year of the co-ops. Why is it that they are neglecting co-ops? And I'll talk more about that as we go forward. But, Mr. Speaker, and I will talk a bit more about this, was what the government announced last May, May 2nd, about their review of 15 pieces of labour law here in Saskatchewan. And where that came from, we're not sure, but out of the blue they decided that they were going to overhaul 100 years worth of legislation in 90 short days.

Now it is something that I think that we can all agree on that it's a good thing that government every once in a while decides to review legislation. It's the right thing to do to make sure that you're current, that you're up-to-date, and you're meeting the needs of people here in Saskatchewan. You're meeting the needs of people and businesses, and it's a fair balance. That's what you've got to do. But to do it in 90 days, to say you can only write in, people were really concerned about that. Because you know, people really felt that they were part of what made this province go so well right now. They were part of the economy that built this province, but now they're being told that something wasn't quite right.

Now when I look at this on page 6 of the Throne Speech, enhancing competitiveness, this is the part that talks about the employment Act, two short paragraphs about it. But, Mr. Speaker, what's left out? What's the other word that I don't see in there? It talks about most modern, competitive, fair, and balanced labour and employment environment in Canada. Many of those parts I agree with. But you know what's a real priority here in Saskatchewan, I've got to say, Mr. Speaker, is safety. Where is safety in this mandate? It's just not there. And yet we as a province have the highest or the second highest injury rate in Canada. If there's one thing we need to do, we need to get that right. We need to get that right.

Too many people are being hurt at work and that's a priority. That's a priority. That's something that's broke, and that's something that has to be fixed. But yet it's not part of the Throne Speech, not part of the Throne Speech. Why is that, Mr. Speaker? We've got to do better than that. And that's what people in my riding and, I think, right across the province are saying.

So, Mr. Speaker, I have some real, real concerns about that and what the real mandate is behind this. I'm really worried about that. And of course when we talk to people through our consultation process and, Mr. Speaker, you may have heard that we went to nine communities over a period of about three weeks actually in September because we wanted to hear from people about what they thought about what we should be doing about labour legislation. And the number one thing they said, the number one thing they said is, do the consultations the right way. They're not afraid of change. They want to make sure it gets done right, but talk to people. Get out there and talk to people. Be proud

of what you believe in. And if you do believe in it, you'll talk to people about it. And I've not heard people so far, from their side, talk about people coming up to them and saying, hey listen, you got to fix that labour code. You got to fix that labour legislation. That's a real problem. So that's something that's really important.

And, Mr. Speaker, the other thing that was happening at those meetings, some of the groups that couldn't make it out — or when I phoned them and said, please come out; I want to extend this invitation to come out — they had not even heard about it. Because of when the announcement was made, made in May, people were already starting to get a bit in that summer, late spring mode, and did not know about it. For example, the students — students at the University of Saskatchewan, University of Regina, and Kelsey — I can tell you did not know about this. In fact I had to share with them the government document, our invitation, what our plan was. They had not heard about this. And I think that's really important. It's students that hadn't heard about it.

You also had seniors. When I met with the senior Council on Aging in Saskatoon, as a group, they want to talk about employment. That was part of their agenda. They said, let's talk about employment. And I said, have you heard about the government's new plans about labour employment? They didn't; they hadn't heard a word about it. And I know that several of the government-side MLAs from Saskatoon had met with that group but not raised the issue about the employment labour code that might be up for . . . that's up for review.

And newcomers, clearly we're very proud of the fact that we have in our province more newcomers, and it's a good thing to see. But again, another group that's not being included. And again the First Nations and Métis not fully engaged.

And, of course, Mr. Speaker, these things are complex. And it's important that you develop a capacity so when you consult with groups they can actually have an informed opinion. You just can't walk up to them and say, so what do you think? And they go, wow, you know the 15 pieces of legislation, that's hundreds of pages. What are they going to say? They want to know more, but they want to make sure what they say is what reflects their true values. So you have to develop that capacity.

So, Mr. Speaker, we'll be talking a lot about this employment code that we've heard about. We hope that it gets introduced sooner than later, not on the last day of session, because we want to have as much time to review it as possible.

Now, Mr. Speaker, of course you know that I've been advocating a lot around Jimmy's law, and I'm hoping that we can see progress with that shortly. We're going to be talking a lot about that and we hope that that . . . Because I think that's a common sense issue that we have to tackle. And I really think that we have to get on this as soon as we can. And I'm looking forward to seeing more about that.

And I am also looking forward to seeing more details about the orange zone speeding law. I know that I can feel very good about that. That's a very important one. Speeding through those construction zones is just not on. That is something that needs to be fixed,

and so we look forward to that.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, the other issue around labour that just needs to be fixed, needs to be fixed as quickly as possible is around essential services. The Throne Speech was silent on that, not a word about that. And I clearly think if the people of Saskatchewan want one piece of legislation fixed in this province of those 15 pieces of legislation, it's that one that Judge Ball said, you've got to get back and work with the stakeholders, work with unions. Get it right and then we can move on.

Here's a piece of legislation that's broken, that was poorly written, lack of consultation. In fact Judge Ball even cited that as an issue. It was an international embarrassment for us in Saskatchewan. We actually have a strong reputation in terms of labour, whether it's occupational health and safety or whether it's labour standards. And here we had this embarrassment of the essential services legislation. We need to get that fixed as quickly as possible.

The government needs to talk and include and work with all the stakeholders to make sure everyone feels that it's a fair and balanced approach to how trade unions can practise in this province. And that's all they're looking for, is it's fair and it's balanced. Not one side have more power than the other, but that we can get collective bargaining resolved in a way that does not endanger public safety but also can make sure people can exercise their rights. That's hugely important.

Mr. Speaker, as well I wanted to touch briefly on municipal affairs. As a critic for Municipal Affairs, I want to first extend my congratulations to all the people who will be coming back to sit on city councils, town councils across this province. I also want to recognize and thank all those people who put their names forward to serve our communities across the province. That's not an easy job, and it's one that when you do that you really do put yourself out there publicly. And it's really one that I think we should take a moment and thank everyone for doing that. And now we have new city, town councils, RM [rural municipality] councils across the province, and we'll be happy to work with those folks.

I do want to talk a little about infrastructure, hugely an important issue. I was able to take in some of the National Infrastructure Summit here in Regina this fall. Very important. Of course we know that's a huge deficit right across Canada, and Saskatchewan's no exception. And I will be looking forward to see how this government talks about asset management, particularly when it comes to provincial interest. What's our interest when it comes to seeing what is restored, what is built, what is new? What do we do about our roads, our water systems, and that type of thing?

But also, Mr. Speaker, it's a real opportunity, it's a real opportunity to talk about sustainability. How can our communities be sustainable? How can they be green communities so that they can last longer than ever before? We've learned things about infrastructure over the last few decades and we can put that into play. Let's make sure we don't go in a way that we regret later on where we want to have our cities, our communities, our countryside . . . I mean it's a beautiful province and we want to make

sure that it's sustainable and our communities are sustainable.

I do have to say, just I want to touch on one issue around the P.A. [Prince Albert] bridge. It was interesting that we were out in Prince Albert just after Labour Day weekend. Of course it was the talk of the town. And I don't know if the folks from Prince Albert will talk about this, but the concern was the story of people trying to cross the bridge on Labour Day Monday afternoon when the line across was something like 5 miles. And they're trying to get an answer from the government: where is that second bridge in terms of a priority for this government? It's not mentioned.

Now we're saying there should be some sort of list, some sort of inventory of what are important infrastructure projects for this province. And I've got to say, Prince Albert, the second bridge would make a big difference not only for the city of Prince Albert, for the northerners, the mining industry, the economic growth of the North. It's huge.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, I see that housing has been put on the Throne Speech, and rightfully so. But I do have to say that after five years you would think that we would not be talking so much about housing affordability, that more would have been done in this area. But clearly what we see are some real, real significant gaps in a housing strategy, that folks are still raising concerns. And we saw the new mayor of Regina talking about that he's going to do a housing summit on affordable housing, and rightfully so. But this government has failed, has failed over the last five years to really make a dent in this market. We see extremely low vacancy rates and in a few weeks we'll see what the new ones are from CMHC [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation]. Will you have Regina just floating around point six per cent? And I don't know if that'll change very much. But you have Regina in that kind of a circumstance. That's a real problem. And we still see high rents, and we see high rents and we still have people talking to us about, what can we do about that? And we know the government here put forward a piece of legislation last spring about rent, rogue landlords. That was a very interesting piece of legislation that is just totally ineffectual when it comes to protecting tenants from being gouged. And still they're not really addressing that.

Couple of things that I was looking for in the Throne Speech. Housing First, just not there. Just not there. Anything around co-op housing you would think would be there this year . . . [inaudible] . . . going to be a year for co-op housing and special initiative, international year of co-ops. Not a word about co-op housing. And of course we know many of them, their funding becomes a risk over the next couple of years. That's a huge issue. So more around that.

But we saw this summer the government announced plans around their social housing program for Sask Housing that will affect some 15,000 families or people in their units. And of course they targeted 800 people. We're not sure. They decided to go right at that in the cities. But in the rural areas and the northern areas, this press release said clearly they're going to consult. But I don't know what's happening with that. And we're going to have lots of questions. But we're getting letters from people who felt that they were in a place where their rent was going to be predictable and it's not. And some bizarre logic by some of the folks at Sask Housing about how this is going to create new spaces. But

where do those 800 people go? I mean it just doesn't seem fair and not well-thought-out at all. Everyone needs a place. So we have to approach this in a common sense way, but to make a media project out of it was a problem. And we hear more especially around northern housing and senior housing, a lot more has to be done around that. So it's really, really something.

I just want to speak briefly about highways and a couple of other topics here. First, highways. I want to say that, you know, I was shocked when yet we had another press release on the twinning of Highway No. 11. I believe it is, since 2008 . . . Six times? Six times? That's amazing. Six times, and I'm sure we're not finished yet, are we? Are we going to hit 10? 10? Who says 12? Maybe it'll be 12 press releases. Who knows? Who knows? And of course what happened last Friday around the Hatchet Lake road. The promise, the one press release that they could have kept — they issued a press release — and they should have kept that but they chose not to.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what I was really shocked about was the fact that we did not hear about highway safety and the fact that in Saskatchewan we have some real challenges around highway safety. And you know, I was on the Internet and taking a look at how do we stack up across Canada. And of course you know, we had in the year — this is from SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance] — 2010, 167 traffic fatalities in Saskatchewan. And I know for every family, every group, this is really a tragic situation when we have a highway death or a death on a road.

How do we stack up against other provinces, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Well here are the stats from 2009. Per 100,000 population, we have 14.7 highway deaths. That's number two. Only the Yukon is higher; they have 20. Where's Manitoba in terms of highway deaths? 7.1. And where's Alberta? 9.6. But we're over 30 per cent higher than Alberta, at 14.7. How does that work? How does that work?

And here we go. How about if we look at it in terms of per 100,000 licensed drivers? We have 21 fatalities per 100,000 licensed drivers. Alberta has 12. Manitoba has 11. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the Throne Speech not one word about highway safety, about fatalities on highways. We're very supportive of the orange zone, but what about these folks here? We could do more. We should be doing more. And if there's something that's broke, this is it, and we should be fixing it. So that's a real problem, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I just want to say health, not a word about mental health. I know that's an issue that's a big concern in my riding. That, you know, the issues around addictions is a big deal, but not a word about addictions. Not a word about addictions, and not a word about bullying. Clearly we need to do more about this. And mental health issues in Saskatchewan, Canada, are becoming a bigger and bigger issue as we recognize the impact it has on our families, our communities. And we saw that just recently in BC [British Columbia] with the tragic death of a young high school girl because of bullying. We can do more, and we should be doing more. And not a word in this Throne Speech about mental health. We should be doing much more.

And of course I just want to, as a teacher, just to talk about education and their approach

that is outlined in the Throne Speech about standardized testing and how that's going to resolve the issue around grade 12, the falling grade 12 graduation rates. And clearly, Mr. Speaker, that may be one way to approach it, but many of us who were at the STF [Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation] luncheon, and we heard other causes. You know, when we start, when kids start to experience success in school, it really is at an early age. It's not in grade 9 or grade 10. You can't start in high school. You have to start even pre-school. And we see what this government thinks about pre-school education. So we have to start at an earlier age, and we have to talk about what really is . . . How can we make the connection between kids in schools better? A lot of it is housing; it's nutrition; it's poverty — those things. That's the challenge that we have to do to make sure every kid comes to school ready to learn. And we do it in grade 1. We do it in pre-school. We do it in kindergarten. And if we do it then, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we'll have a good group of high school kids that will do well. But you've got to make that connection early on so they're strong.

And really, standardized testing, while it's one interesting way of approaching it, I'd be curious to know what the STF has to think about this. And we'll be looking for this. I know the Premier stood up with his three pages of endorsements. I'm not sure if the STF was on that list or not. He didn't read through the list. I'd be very curious about it.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do want to wrap up because I know we've got lots of people who want to weigh in on this debate. Of course I have really a lot more that I could say around the environment too. I mean we could go on and on. But we'll have more time when we debate specific concerns.

What I look for is what's in it for people in the middle class, the people that are in my neighbourhood. I didn't see an awful lot, Mr. Speaker. I didn't see people who are looking for resolutions around bullying in our schools. I didn't see that kind of stuff. I didn't see . . . not much for my neighbours. I know my neighbours weren't down at that \$100-a-plate dinner.

They're worried about the surprises that they may get. This government is getting a bit of a reputation for delivering surprises on the last day before the end of session in December or early . . . or at the last days of spring session like they did last year around labour legislation or the three more MLAs. Please, Mr. Deputy Speaker, no more surprises. That's what my people are saying. No more surprises. We want straight talk on our finances. This government's getting a reputation as well as not . . . not straight talk that they can really, really believe in.

So, Mr. Speaker, in summary, I will be supporting the amendment that's put forward, that there's very little that is new in this Throne Speech. In fact it's the rehash of old ideas that allows ideology to trump common sense, and that it's put an agenda that puts politicians ahead of people, and it ignores the middle class and small businesses of Saskatchewan. So therefore I will be supporting the amendment and not the main motion. Thank you very much.