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Bill No. 45 – The Miscellaneous Statutes (Saskatchewan Telecommunications) Amendment Act, 2012

Mr. Forbes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today, to rise and speak on Bill No. 45, *An Act to Amend The Saskatchewan Telecommunications Act* and *The Saskatchewan Telecommunications Holding Corporation Act* or known as the miscellaneous statutes amendment Act, 2012.

It is an important piece of legislation. We know the Crowns are an important part of our economy here in our province and they've served us well. And definitely SaskTel has done that over the many decades of Saskatchewan's history in terms of technology and taking us from those rural exchange, or small town exchanges of phones and all of that, to now dealing with Internet and cellphones and all of that.

And of course we are where we are, and many people would credit the Crowns for giving us stability in our economy, in our phones, knowing (a) that we've got the telecommunications solved; we've got the insurance solved; we've got the energy part of it solved. And so when we talk about the Crowns, it's very important that we take time to reflect on these bills because a lot of things that were in place prior were put in place to protect the integrity of the Crowns.

And it's important that we keep that in mind and we ask questions. Are these changes necessary? Are they something that we must do? I mean often we think — and I know politicians often think — that if only it was a little easier, we could do things so much more quickly and solve a lot of problems. But boy, then we get into problems because it's a little too easy.

And so it's important that we take a look at the intention of Bill No. 45. What does it really mean? What does it really ask for and is it important? What are the unintended consequences? What might they be?

And if they make common sense, let's do it. But let's also make sure, let's take a moment

to reflect on this. Because in a province like Saskatchewan, where our economy is so resource-based and based throughout its modern history in terms of agriculture, Crowns are critical to maintain who we are. And I mean that as a whole province, not just the urban, the two urban large cities, but right across the province, right from the North right down to the South and throughout the province. So it's important that we take a look at this.

So it's not a long Act. In fact it's only one page, but I do want to take a minute to take a look at what the minister had said about this and why this was important. I'll just reflect a minute on what he had said. And he had talked about the first part was dealing with "... simple housekeeping matter[s] of monetary limits of order in councils and the length of the term of borrowing by SaskTel."

So over the past five years I understand the Canadian bond market has expanded and now they issue bonds for 30 years or more. And this hasn't been provided to the province or SaskTel for a long time. It talks about the recent credit upgrades, and of course we have a long history now, a long history of credit upgrades for the last, I would think the last 10 years if not the last 15 years of credit upgrades. So this is important.

It talks about how it could potentially impact SaskTel's ability to participate directly in the province's borrowing program. So what he's really talking about is asking that SaskTel and, well SaskTel in this case, be able to participate in a program where the term is 30 years or longer. And that seems to make some sense so we'll take a look at that. And that's really, really important. So I think that that's one part.

But the second part, and this is one that I know, and I know my colleague from Regina spoke earlier on this. He talks about:

The housekeeping matter is to align SaskTel's dollar limit for the order in council with CIC's [Crown Investments Corporation of Saskatchewan] model that was recommended by the Standing Committee on Crown Corporations. Currently SaskTel requires an order in council for all lands purchased in excess of \$100,000. This could delay the . . . [delay] of land for cell towers.

Now, it's interesting. It says, could delay the land that they want to purchase for cell towers. So I'm not sure if it's specifically and only for cell towers or that's just an example that he's using.

Now he's talking about how it's a very competitive market, the cellular market, and how important it is to be able to move quickly. There's a couple of flags in there. First of all, I know in Saskatoon we've had some controversy about where cell towers are placed, and so I'm not sure how that all fits into that whole process. Do we want to make sure that when cell towers go up in neighbourhoods that they're welcomed and that people feel okay about them, that the land isn't quickly bought? A cell tower goes up and it's a done deal. Like I think we have to make sure that we take some time to think about that.

And if I read this right, when he's talking about the amendment for:

The Saskatchewan Telecommunications Act is amended in the manner set forth in this section.

And it's section 2(2):

Subsection 11(3) is repealed and the following substituted:

“The corporation shall obtain the approval of the Lieutenant Governor in Council if the purchase price or sale price of real property included in one transaction entered into by the corporation exceeds the amount fixed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council.”

So it sounds like it could be both the purchase or the sale price and that's what the focus is around, the \$100,000. And it goes down into section 11(4) which follows and talks about the purchase price or the sale price.

So we're not just talking about the ability to buy land for cell towers. Maybe we are. Maybe that's the complete intention. But it is amending the SaskTel communications holding corporation Act and the SaskTel communications Act. And I have some questions about that because it's just not as clear as it might be. And so we need to know what that really means.

And so I have a lot of questions and I think that we now see . . . And actually it was very interesting, reading the remarks from my colleague from Regina Rosemont who is talking about . . . And he's the Chair of the Public Accounts and I think he has a fair bit of credibility in this. And I think we all worry, we all worry when this government on this side leans a little too heavy towards the Crowns for supporting them in their balanced budgets. And we've just seen that recently just a few weeks ago, and we've seen it in the past where millions, tens of millions, hundreds of millions have come from the Crowns over to the government.

And so when we see that kind of a habit by a government when they are pressed in terms of making their budgets work, we have some real concerns. And so when we see this kind of a bill before us, it makes us ask a few questions. What is this really all about? Is it really about just buying some land for cell towers or is this enabling them to do much more? And so, Mr. Speaker, I think that we have to ask them some questions about this, and we will ask some questions about this. Have they lost deals where they . . . [inaudible] . . . cell tower deals? I'd be very curious because I know of two cell towers, particularly in Saskatoon, where questions were raised about their location. And we would not want to see this happen so quickly that neighbours are pitted against one another because of a cell tower going up.

We need to take that time to get things and do them in the proper manner. So things aren't quite as straight forward as they might be. We talk about the 30-year. That may be a new pattern and that seems to be a logical thing. Of course we need to know more about that, but I am concerned about this government and its relationship to the Crowns and especially SaskPower and SaskTel and Sask Energy and using them to, as I said, to make

their budgets work. And the public is watching as well. And so when this kind of thing happens . . . And of course the minister's framed it as just buying land, but here it's actually buying and selling. It's a two-way street. So the legislation raises questions about what really is the intent. And so we have questions.

And I think it's rightly so that we take some time, particularly as we're getting closer to budget. And there's been all sorts of signals sent out that the budget's going to be a tough one. And this government has been known to, when tough decisions are made, they often go to the Crowns, and they often rely heavily on them, overly relying on them to an extent that many feel that they're really at risk. And then they're put into a tough spot where they are kind of forced to make . . . They may be making choices that later on would be viewed as not the best.

So we have a lot of questions about this. And we know that we can look back in the paper when we talk about SaskTel Internet, and we can know that last summer or about a year ago, we heard about rural Saskatchewan and SaskTel Internet, about 8,000 high-speed Internet users in rural Saskatchewan, there was some questions about the capacity of SaskTel to continue on with that. And so we really have questions in terms of making sure that this government is allowing SaskTel to do its work and not using it as a cash cow necessarily to get money so that when times are tough, they're having to deliver cash and not doing the kind of things that people right across this province are expecting.

And I think in Saskatchewan, you look at SaskTel as a provider of telecommunications right from the North right down to the South. Rural is right involved as much as the urban. And we look at cellphone coverage, and we think that's all very critical. But we see dangerous signals from this government in terms of how they can be hobbling this corporation. And so when we see this kind of enabling legislation to allow bigger financial transactions to happen without the public scrutiny, then we have some problems.

And so, Mr. Speaker, I think that this is one that we'll have a lot of questions in committee, because we know for so many people in Saskatchewan, SaskTel has a long history. We've all grown up counting on SaskTel. And we can tell just by the loyalty factor of how many people use SaskTel for their cellphones or how many people use SaskTel for their Internet addresses, you can tell there is a huge loyalty factor. So we can't be doing things that weaken our Crown corporations.

And so when we kind of do this, we want to know, is this being well thought out? Is there good management behind it? Is it sound? I'm not so worried so much about the 30 years. I don't know a lot about that. We'll have questions about that. But I am worried more about the \$100,000 and the ability to sell and buy land so quickly that the public scrutiny is not there.

So with that, Mr. Speaker, I know we have a long evening ahead of us and there's a lot of bills that we want to cover. And so at this point I would want to move adjournment on Bill No. 45, *An Act to amend The Saskatchewan Telecommunications Act and The Saskatchewan Telecommunications Holding Corporation Act*, also known as the

miscellaneous statutes Act, 2012. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.