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(HANSARD) Published under the authority of The Honourable Dan D'Autremont Speaker

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Rent Increases for Tenants

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, yesterday we learned that the Sask Party's plan for affordable housing is completely useless. In a city with the rental vacancy rate hovering around 1 per cent, affordable housing is simply not a priority for this government. Tenants at a building in Regina received notice for a huge increase in their rent. One of the increases is jumping by \$520; that's 77 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, that kind of rent increase is completely unaffordable, especially to a person who is living on a fixed income. To the Minister: why does the Sask Party have no plan for the middle-class and working families who are being hit hard by rent increases that almost double their monthly living costs?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We acknowledge that this is a difficult situation that's going to impact these individuals at the building that was identified in the media yesterday. Some of these are long-term residents, Mr. Speaker, and this is their home. A sudden change of this nature would be very stressful for anyone.

Mr. Speaker, the landlord in that particular case is a member of the Saskatchewan Rental Housing Industry Association. We encourage all tenants to take advantage of their tenant assistance program which they have. In addition, Mr. Speaker, with respect to this particular situation, the director of the Office of Residential Tenancies will be meeting personally with these tenants tomorrow, and he's also been in close contact with the association.

And, Mr. Speaker, on this matter I'm prepared to meet with the affected tenants after question period with my colleague, the Minister of Social Services, to talk about the issue and see what can be done to help these particular individuals.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Mr. Speaker, this Minister's sympathy is cold comfort for these people who are trying to find a place . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . And they laugh. Look at them laugh about this. Their rent's going up by 77 per cent and they laugh about it, Mr. Speaker. They have no plan for affordable housing in this province, and they tweaked a rule to allow for six months notice for rent increase. And that notice might as well say eviction because that's what it really is all about. And that's shameful, Mr. Speaker.

Other provinces have a plan to stop this kind of outrageous rent increases. It's about rent controls, and that's the kind of plan we need in a modern Saskatchewan. Mr. Speaker, the tenants of Robinson Street building are here today. They are petitioning the government to stop these outrageous increases and help them stay in their homes. Some have lived in that building, and as the minister has identified, for over 30 years. Will the minister do the right thing and institute rent controls to stop gouging renters here in Saskatchewan?

The Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Hon. Mr. Wyant: Well thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've made it perfectly clear we're not going to institute rent controls in this province, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, when we formed government in 2007 landlords were only required to provide a three-month notice for rent increase. In 2008 we recognized that there were pressures on the rental market and the legislation was not adequate. So in response, Mr. Speaker, we increased the notice required for rent increases to six months. We further amended the legislation in 2012 to increase the notice period to 12 months, Mr. Speaker, the highest in Canada, unless the landlord belongs to an approved association.

Mr. Speaker, the Saskatchewan rental housing association was chosen specifically for their code of conduct, their code of ethics, and their tenant assistance program. When a tenant contacts the association, they will attempt to bring the two sides together in respect to the rent increases. And if that doesn't work, Mr. Speaker, they'll assist the tenant with finding other accommodations or other programs. And we're confident that that program will be of great assistance to encourage the parties to get together, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: I recognize the member for Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: Well, Mr. Speaker, you know, Mr. Speaker, as the minister talks about what's happening across Canada, we know that 80 per cent — 80 per cent — of Canadians live with some form of rent control under all stripes of political parties. And that's true, and that's what should be happening here in Saskatchewan. And they know the tweaking they've done with rent control laws in Saskatchewan just aren't getting the job done, and they don't work, and they leave people out in the cold. And rent control is something that we need now to stop the slow, painful, inescapable eviction notices that in fact these people are facing.

Without rent control, outrageous \$500-a-month increases like this have become the norm in too many of our communities. And that's simply unacceptable and the government should be ashamed it has nothing to offer these tenants to protect them from being

gouged.

Why does the minister sit on his hands when he could be putting in rent controls to help tenants afford the basics and stay in their homes?

Hon. Mr. Wyant: Mr. Speaker, I beg to differ with my friend opposite. This rent increase is an exception to the rule. The rent increases that we've been seeing across the province have been more in the 3 to 4 per cent range.

Mr. Speaker, we've already said we're not going to consider rent controls. And even the New Democrats acknowledge that rent controls didn't work. Mr. Speaker, in their 2007 housing report, it's quoted as saying rent controls would be a disincentive for investment, and rent controls create uncertainty that will lead to a decline in the housing availability.

Mr. Speaker, rent controls are a disincentive to invest in existing housing stock, and they're a disincentive to invest in new housing stock, Mr. Speaker.