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**DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS**

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NO. 55A TUESDAY, APRIL 29, 2014, 13:30

Question Period:

**University of Saskatchewan Review Process**

**Mr. Broten:** — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Dr. Jim Miller, a highly respected and award-winning historian at the University of Saskatchewan, says TransformUS is the “. . . biggest disaster that’s happened to the University of Saskatchewan apart from the Great Depression in the 1930s.”

My question, Mr. Speaker, is for the Premier: does he agree with Dr. Miller that TransformUS is the biggest disaster to face the university since the Great Depression?

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Minister of Advanced Education.

**Hon. Mr. Norris:** Mr. Speaker, thanks very much for the opportunity to talk about the University of Saskatchewan. The University of Saskatchewan is the best-funded medical doctoral university in Canada, based on page 100 in Macleans, Mr. Speaker, per student.

In fact the member opposite references the work of Jim Miller, and Jim Miller is one of the most highly respected and regarded historians all across the country. And, Mr. Speaker, when it comes to his work, that is without question.

Regarding the question of TransformUS, Mr. Speaker, that is an internal review process and prioritization process at the University of Saskatchewan. The members opposite are probably aware that this process has four or five different phases to it. It includes task force reports that have been submitted last December, consultation and feedback that has occurred in December through into January, analysis and implementation which is currently under way, and there’ll be forthcoming actions, Mr. Speaker. It’s quite simply too early to determine what will be included in TransformUS because that final allotment has not taken place yet.

**The Speaker:**I recognize the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mr. Broten:** Mr. Speaker, enough has occurred through TransformUS that many academics and people in the university community are greatly concerned. The question was whether or not the Premier, this government agrees with Dr. Miller in his assessment. But it’s not just Dr. Miller who’s raising concerns.

Dr. Eric Howe was actually on the TransformUS academic task force because he wanted to be part of it to help make the process work. But he resigned last October, Mr. Speaker, because it was clear to him that the process was incredibly flawed and it would lead to disastrous outcomes for the university and for our province. Dr. Howe says this:

At the conclusion of TransformUS, with the U of S no longer responding to the urgent social needs of the province, having eliminated its elite “boutique” programs, having transferred away or gutted many of its colleges, it would be appropriate to rename the U of S too. Meewasin Valley Community College would seem to be appropriate.

Mr. Speaker, my question to the Premier: when we hear such serious concerns from respected academics at the university, how can this government not be concerned about what is happening through TransformUS at our province's largest university?

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Minister of Advanced Education.

**Hon. Mr. Norris:** Mr. Speaker, to have the member opposite belittle the University of Saskatchewan, which is seen across this country and around the world as one of the foremost institutions, Mr. Speaker, institutions, especially in key areas of the life sciences . . . It is the home of the Western College of Veterinary Medicine that the members opposite tarped. Tarped — they didn't complete the construction. We had to complete that.

It's home to InterVac [international vaccine centre] and VIDO [Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization] which we as a government have helped to fund operationally. It is home to the Canadian Light Source synchrotron, the only synchrotron in the country. And the members opposite should know about that, Mr. Speaker, and the work that's under way.

And as far as the work that continues to be invested, there are record investments being made at the University of Saskatchewan. The University of Saskatchewan is an independent, and rightfully independent, post-secondary institution, leading post-secondary institution in this country. And we will let the university do its business.

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mr. Broten:** Mr. Speaker, when we have respected professors at the University of Saskatchewan saying that TransformUS is the worst thing to hit the university since the Great Depression, that we might as well at the end of TransformUS rename the university Meewasin Valley community college, Mr. Speaker, I would expect a little less bravado from government members. And I would expect a lot more concern about what members of the university community are saying.

It's not just these academics, Mr. Speaker, that have said this. The University of Saskatchewan Faculty Association has expressed significant concerns about the implications of TransformUS. The University of Saskatchewan Students' Union, Mr. Speaker, has passed a motion of non-confidence in the TransformUS process.

So again, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: when we have students, when we have staff, when we have faculty all voicing their concerns about the TransformUS process, how can this

government not be concerned about what is happening at the U of S [University of Saskatchewan] under its watch?

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Minister of Advanced Education.

**Hon. Mr. Norris:** Mr. Speaker, this government takes the University of Saskatchewan and all our post-secondary institutions very seriously. That's one of the reasons that there's been a 65 per cent increase in operating funding under this government to the University of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, importantly, importantly, Mr. Speaker, we also know that there are independent structures of governance at the university. Now the member opposite may be suggesting that he would become involved, and I'd be very curious to hear about that. He'd be involved in these kind of governance deliberations as a public official.

But what I can say, Mr. Speaker, is that before he makes any more allusions, what I do know is that under the NDP 20 years ago, the operating budget of the University of Saskatchewan was cut by 4 per cent. This year, Mr. Speaker, this year, the operating budget has gone up by almost 4 per cent, Mr. Speaker. We're making an investment because we know the University of Saskatchewan continues to lead the way across the country.

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mr. Broten:** Mr. Speaker, we hear a very defensive tone coming from the minister. And that defensive tone when combined with the dismissive attitude, Mr. Speaker, is a very dangerous combination for the University of Saskatchewan.

There are many concerns being raised about the TransformUS process, about it not being open and transparent; about students not being properly involved; about the process being biased against smaller programs, against specialized programs, against Aboriginal programs, Mr. Speaker; about deans, about deans and executive directors, Mr. Speaker, not being free to express their views and express their concerns. And those are just some of the concerns about the process.

But the real concerns, the greatest concerns, are about the long-term ramifications to the University of Saskatchewan when colleges are gutted, when programs are ended, Mr. Speaker, and when there is long-term damage being done to the University of Saskatchewan, when they are shrinking our province's largest university.

My question, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier: how can this government not be concerned when these serious concerns are being expressed?

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Minister of Advanced Education.

**Hon. Mr. Norris:** Mr. Speaker, I'll continue to defend the University of Saskatchewan as long as I stand here. And, Mr. Speaker, here's a direct quote from the website of the University of Saskatchewan directly from the TransformUS:

Relative to the four western Canadian provinces, an increase of 2% of the base provincial grant in 2014 was among the highest. Manitoba increased its base grants for universities at 2.5%, Alberta maintained grants at 2013 levels after reducing grant levels by approximately 5.6% in 2013, and the provincial grant for British Columbia universities was reduced by 1.1% for 2014. When we compare the U of S to other provincial universities, we are in a more favourable funding circumstance and receive more public support, both as a funding priority and in terms of public acknowledgement and recognition of the value of the U of S.

Mr. Speaker, we're making investments that are making a real difference at the University of Saskatchewan for the students, for the scholars, for the researchers, and families right across the province. And, Mr. Speaker, we're going to continue to do that.

NO. 57A THURSDAY, MAY 1, 2014, 10:00

**Mr. Broten:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When we brought forward concerns we've been hearing from professors and students about TransformUS and its long-term ramifications for the university, the minister said that everything is fine and that he has full confidence in the TransformUS process. My question, Mr. Speaker, is to the Premier: does he share this lack of concern?

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Minister of Advanced Education.

**Hon. Mr. Norris:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, Mr. Speaker, I reject the premise of the question. In fact, Mr. Speaker, it's one of the reasons that we as a government invested more than \$350 million in this budget.

Mr. Speaker, that marks a 65 per cent increase in operating support to the University of Saskatchewan since we've had the honour of serving government. Here's what the TransformUS has to say about government support, and I quote:

To respond more fully to the question of how well the university is supported by the government, one needs to compare how we are doing relative to other provincial sectors in terms of total funding and comparatively with our western Canadian peers. In the March 2014 provincial budget, the allocation for Advanced Education increased by 3.7%. The resulting increase to the University of Saskatchewan was approximately 4.4%.

Mr. Speaker, it goes on to say, "When we compare across provincial sectors, post-secondary education received the largest increase in 2014." Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mr. Broten:** Mr. Speaker, the question was about the concerns being raised on campus about the TransformUS process and its long-term implications for the university, and whether the Premier shares the lack of concern that we just saw once again from the Minister of Advanced Ed.

Mr. Speaker, there's a big difference, there's a big difference between interfering in university affairs and ensuring that the right questions are asked and taking a proper interest in what's happening at our publicly funded university. This government is failing to do that, Mr. Speaker, but instead they've given carte blanche to the TransformUS process, and they are stubbornly dismissing the very real concerns that are being brought forward by respected faculty and by students.

One of the big concerns is about the elimination of jobs, Mr. Speaker. We've already seen the elimination of 248 jobs on campus, and yesterday we learned that there will be even more cuts. Mr. Speaker, my question is to the Premier: how many jobs will be eliminated at the University of Saskatchewan at the conclusion of TransformUS?

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Minister of Advanced Education.

**Hon. Mr. Norris:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, once again I reject completely the notion that we are in any way overlooking the concerns of students, of scholars, of faculty. In fact just this morning, I sent an email off to Dr. Sandy Ervin. Sandy has an op-ed piece today in The StarPhoenix, to which I responded:

While there are points worthy of discussion for us as a result of your op-ed piece, my most direct and immediate concern is for the student that you reference. If and as she's interested in following up directly, please feel free to provide her with this email address or the ones listed below.

Mr. Speaker, I'm delighted with our investments. We know what's going on at the University of Saskatchewan. We know that's meant to help meet a promise of making sure that this is one of the world's leading institutions. That's why we're making record investments, Mr. Speaker, record investments — more than \$350 million in this year's budget.

Mr. Speaker, we're attentive to what's going on. At the same time, we're very respectful of the governance and independence, the rightful independence of the University of Saskatchewan to continue on its trajectory towards world-class education for our students in Saskatchewan.

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mr. Broten:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I suppose it's good that the minister is sharing his email address. I didn't know that was such a guarded secret.

But the concern, Mr. Speaker, is when respected faculty, when the USSU [University of Saskatchewan Students' Union], when the faculty association have voiced their concerns about TransformUS, we saw the minister say as recently as this week that he had confidence in the TransformUS process and that it was fine as it is. There were no alarm bells that the minister saw.

Students, faculty, and staff, Mr. Speaker, have been on edge on campus for months now. And, Mr. Speaker, they remain on edge because there was some information released yesterday in the report, but the final details are not there. It's understandable that the mood on campus is very grim. One program that will be greatly affected, Mr. Speaker, is the school of public health, which just recently received international accreditation which is vital to its ongoing success. But the TransformUS report yesterday stated that the school of public health should be rolled into the College of Medicine. The concerns that I'm hearing, Mr. Speaker, is that this could jeopardize the recent accreditation that it received.

My question, Mr. Speaker, is to the Premier: is he aware of this concern, and what is this government doing to ensure that our school of public health maintains its accreditation and maintains its very well-earned reputation?

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Minister of Advanced Education.

**Hon. Mr. Norris:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, this is a fair and legitimate question. In fact it's one that we've been working on with the university for a considerable period of time. In fact, Mr. Speaker, just this week I've received reassurance from the president. I'll read it in for the record, and that is:

Nothing is decided until it goes through the governance bodies. And in this internal matter that the university must manage, we believe that the restructuring will make health care provision better, not worse, and that it will force better accountability and collaboration and that we would [quote] never jeopardize accreditation.

That's directly from the University of Saskatchewan. I'm asking those questions, Mr. Speaker. They're fair and legitimate. We are on the case.

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mr. Broten:** That's an interesting response, Mr. Speaker, because just two days ago this very same minister, when we asked about the outcomes of the TransformUS process, he said it's too early to say anything. And so it's interesting now to know that there's been, it sounds like detailed discussions about the implications of TransformUS. Those are two very different stories we're hearing just recently.

Mr. Speaker, another area that's being affected by TransformUS is the Centre for Continuing and Distance Education, which is slated to be gutted. The centre offers, Mr. Speaker, language courses, music, business and leadership programs, and personal and professional interest programs. It's an important centre, Mr. Speaker, for the city of Saskatoon, but important for the entire province.

Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier: is he concerned to hear that the Centre for Continuing and Distance Education at the University of Saskatchewan is on the chopping block?

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Minister of Advanced Education.

**Hon. Mr. Norris:** Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, a fair and legitimate question, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, what we do know is that key functions that the centre has undertaken will actually be shifted to some academic programming. It may actually create more opportunities for graduate students or retired faculty members to get out and actually engage with members of the community.

What's important here, Mr. Speaker, what's important is that this is an internal university matter. And, Mr. Speaker, we're very, very pleased to talk about post-secondary education. We're very pleased to talk about \$5.5 billion of investment as our track record. We're pleased to talk about the more than \$350 million invested in the University of Saskatchewan. We're also very, very pleased, Mr. Speaker, to talk about the independence of the University of Saskatchewan and allowing the university to do its business.

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mr. Broten:** Mr. Speaker, he says, allow the university to do its business, but he needs to take an interest in what is happening. They need to have an opinion, Mr. Speaker, whether it's appropriate at the Centre for Continuing and Distance Education to eliminate the language courses, eliminate the music courses, eliminate the business and leadership programs for people here in the province, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday's report, Mr. Speaker, provided some information but lacked concrete details about the full impact of TransformUS on our province's largest university. As the details come out, Mr. Speaker, what I'm hearing from the university community is that there needs to be proper discussion and scrutiny by campus and by all Saskatchewan people, Mr. Speaker. The right questions need to be asked and the Deputy Premier knows that. It's the beginning of May, Mr. Speaker. Students are off campus. Many faculty are away. And what I've heard from deans, what I've heard from student leaders, is that this cannot be rushed.

My question is to the Premier, Mr. Speaker: will he ensure that proper scrutiny occurs, and major decisions that have long-term ramifications for the university for decades to come, Mr. Speaker, will not be rushed through?

**The Speaker:** I recognize the Minister of Advanced Education.

**Hon. Mr. Norris:** Mr. Speaker, I'm sure the member opposite knows that there will be due deliberation and that the governance structures, which include the council, will be fully engaged by this, Mr. Speaker.

But you know, talking about a couple of days ago, the member opposite, and I quote this, Mr. Speaker, he offered this, he said, “. . . that we might as well at the end of TransformUS rename the university Meewasin Valley community college.”

Now, Mr. Speaker, he may quote a few individuals, Mr. Speaker, but here's who I'd like to quote, Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the University of Saskatchewan. Mr. Speaker, I'd like to quote Sir Wilfrid Laurier on the creation of the University of Saskatchewan where he said, “There is no doubt that this university will in time be one of the world's greatest.” And, Mr. Speaker, he went on to say, “Let a university arise here which may be a worthy disciple of Oxford, Cambridge, and other universities which have done so much.” From July 29th, 1910, it's in that spirit that we defend the University of Saskatchewan's independence, Mr. Speaker. And we will continue to do that.