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NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR ESSENTIAL WORKFORCE SKILLS BILL

SECOND READING—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Speech by:

The Honourable Diane Bellemare

Tuesday, November 27, 2018

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

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Hon. Diane Bellemare (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate) moved second reading of Bill S-256, An Act respecting the development of a national framework for essential workforce skills.

She said: Honourable senators, as you know, Canada is internationally renowned for its high education rates. The downside is that many people are overqualified for their jobs. At the same time, according to the Survey of Adult Skills conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, many Canadians of all ages lack the basic skills to adapt to the new realities of the labour market. The discrepancy between the supply of and demand for desired skills leads many to believe that a silent crisis is on the horizon.

[English]

This silent crisis is described in a recent study led and published by RBC entitled *Humans Wanted*. It said:

We discovered a quiet crisis — of recent graduates who are overqualified for the jobs they're in, of unemployed youth who weren't trained for the jobs that are out there, and young Canadians everywhere who feel they aren't ready for the future of work.

Too many have been trained for jobs that may go away rather than equipped with skills that will be ever more valuable.

[Translation]

Colleagues, I'm sure you'll agree that this issue is disturbing. What are we going to do?

Fortunately, there are solutions. I am very excited to introduce Bill S-256, An Act respecting the development of a national framework for essential workforce skills. The bill proposes a way to ensure that current and future workforce skills are aligned with the needs of the labour market. It is not a cure-all, but it is definitely a step in the right direction.

This bill is related to Bill S-254, An Act to establish Promotion of Essential Skills Learning Week, which I recently introduced here. Bill S-256 clarifies the notion of essential skills and proposes a constitutionally acceptable approach to establishing a common language on essential skills that is recognized across the country. Briefly, let me remind you that essential skills are those basic skills that all individuals must master in order to tackle the economic and social challenges of today and tomorrow. They include basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills, as well as civic and social skills and the ability to learn how to learn.

Today's job market requires more than just a degree. Someone who wants a decent job has to have a variety of essential skills that are not always taught at school. The content of essential skills evolves as technology changes. Today's essential skills are not the same as yesterday's essential skills; they also vary from one occupation or job to another. Over time, people who are already in the job market can fall behind if they haven't had the chance or means to invest in developing their skills.

[English]

Moreover, the findings of the RBC future skills report supports the idea that essential skills are becoming the key to mobility. Their research found that job openings in the next four years will require foundational skills such as critical thinking, coordination and social perceptiveness and complex problem solving.

Their research underlines that digital literacy will be essential to all new jobs and that global competencies, like cultural awareness and languages, will be in demand.

The OECD advocates the same ideas. A 2016 report titled *Skills for a Digital World* states:

Empowering individuals with the relevant skills for the digital world is key for them to fully participate in today's and tomorrow's economic, social and cultural life. The evolving nature of the digital economy requires individuals to rapidly adjust to shifts in skills demands and technology. A greater emphasis should be placed in ensuring that individuals are equipped with strong foundation skills, higher order thinking competencies as well as social and emotional skills to respond to greater levels of uncertainty. In addition, digital literacy is essential to ensure inclusion in the digital economy and society.

This bill is about building a national essential or foundational skills framework.

You may wonder what it really means and who will benefit from it. A national essential skills framework describes and measures skills such as language, literacy, numeracy, digital literacy and other skills in the context in which an individual works, learns and communicates. It is a key component of the infrastructure to support lifelong learning. It pictures skills that are essential for individuals to participate effectively in our society.

In many countries, essential skills frameworks have been developed since the turn of the new century to facilitate a consistent approach to learning and training to basic skills in diverse contexts being personal, community or work. It provides shared concepts and language for describing basic skills and a systematic approach to benchmark, monitor and report on basic skills performance.

[Translation]

An essential skills framework allows individuals, companies and educational and training institutions to develop competency profiles, write training plans, train trainers, and evaluate and

certify training results. It is necessary for the success of investments in continuing education, especially when training is provided in the workplace or is informal or self-guided.

Bill S-256 essentially seeks to create a national standard or framework for basic skills in the context of continuing education. This framework is a social infrastructure that allows individuals, as well as businesses and governments, to make consistent smart investments in skills development. It is a labour market information tool that will help us invest better and therefore invest more in continuing education.

Bill S-256 reflects Canada's constitutional reality. It does not propose any federal interference in the provision of education and training services. The bill primarily proposes a concerted approach to establishing a common language on essential skills. I repeat, this bill has to do with labour market information. A common framework will guide young people through their training. It will encourage businesses that want to train their employees. It will also provide guidance to Indigenous communities that want to participate in the labour market, newcomers to Canada, individuals who want their training to be recognized, all training institutions, and community groups.

Why is a national framework for essential skills so important? Essentially, a common framework will make individual, corporate and government investments more cost-effective. This type of framework also makes it easier for people to transition between jobs and careers.

As you know, in Canada, adult education is primarily an individual responsibility. It is not a right, as it is in Europe. The Advisory Council on Economic Growth told the Department of Finance that the education and training system rests on two pillars: a system for youth and a system for the unemployed, which is funded through EI. There is not much for the rest of the workforce, such as young adults who can't find work, immigrants, First Nations and all those who want decent jobs.

Canada's continuing education system is very decentralized. Under the Canadian Constitution, education and training services are areas of provincial jurisdiction, and each province can act as it sees fit.

In this decentralized context, adult education has evolved at the community level and in a rather haphazard way. In Quebec, for example, adults who did not finish elementary school and secondary school can go to school for free. However, like newcomers, adults who want to further their skills must do so at their own expense.

Private and public schools, as well as colleges and universities, have answered the call for continuing education with a vast array of short-term training programs to meet adults' needs. However, without a framework, it is becoming harder and harder for individuals and businesses to navigate the choices.

Several training institutions that are recognized for their excellence in the digital realm offer online courses. At present, these courses, which are generally fee-based, can't be used to provide mass training services. Online learning will undoubtedly become the norm in the near future, but only if all communities

have access to high-speed Internet. Above all, this training must be recognized through an official certification process that attests to the skills acquired, in addition to ensuring the quality.

Most Canadian businesses invest very little in training their staff. They don't think of themselves as places of learning. Some businesses offer core competency training, such as language classes, outside work hours, but they are few and far between. Some community groups offer literacy programs for those in need, but many of them have had their funding cut and are in great financial need.

In short, we can conclude that Canada's continuing education system is weak and suffers from a lack of funding. What's more, apart from the training offered by professional bodies and public educational institutions, the continuing education system is generally under-recognized. It has no structure to support it.

Bill S-256 seeks to implement a framework for essential workforce skills to bring order to the system, make the most of existing public and private investments, and attract more investment. The benefits of continuing education are enormous. For example, it reduces the amount of time people remain unemployed or the time it takes for them to make the transition between jobs. It helps adults adapt more quickly to our society's economic and social needs. It also increases productivity because it helps workers work better, use equipment more effectively, make fewer mistakes and prevent workplace accidents. In addition to increasing productivity, it also supports non-inflationary wage growth and improves the standard of living for the middle class.

According to Statistics Canada, investment in human capital, that is, in education and essential skills training, is three times as important to economic growth over the long run as investment in physical capital. In short, continuing education today is what education was in the 1960s: a necessity. The certification of essential skills is to the society of today and tomorrow what a degree used to be, namely an important key to access labour market mobility.

What is Canada's recent experience with respect to essential skills development? The federal and provincial governments have previously tried to take action on the issue of basic skills. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Department of Human Resources Development, which is now called ESDC, invested in a huge research project on essential skills. Nine different skills were measured on a scale of one to five. Many senators referred to those essential skills during their speeches on literacy. The nine skills are reading, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking, digital skills and continuous learning.

As part of this research project, 350 essential skills profiles were drafted for various professional and technical occupations taken from Statistics Canada's National Occupational Classification, or NOC. These profiles were created based on interviews with workers, managers, stakeholders and researchers.

The public can still find this information on the Government of Canada Job Bank site, a search engine for essential skills profiles. The federal government website also offers interpretation guides for a wide range of stakeholders, such as training workshop developers, trainers, guidance counsellors, employers, and

parents, to help them advise young people. The department also developed online resources for evaluating and planning essential skills and skills development tools.

It also funded action research, notably with Colleges and Institutes Canada, with a view to developing short-term training programs on basic skills. This research showed that a 24- to 60-hour training session showed demonstrable results when integrated into specific or technical training. In other words, by combining training on basic skills and specific skills, a framework for essential skills would improve the quality of learning in the workplace. It would then become socially viable for governments to invest in the training offered by businesses.

The federal government's Essential Skills Research Project inspired New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta to develop training programs based on similar principles. Unfortunately, most of the provincial initiatives lost momentum, as did the federal project, which ceased to exist. In short, Canada's experience when it comes to essential skills has been disappointing. Nevertheless, many such initiatives have been undertaken in other countries with great success.

Why did the Canadian attempt fail? The short answer to that complex question is a lack of federal-provincial cooperation. It would never have come to this had all governments worked with all lifelong learning stakeholders.

There are financial reasons too, of course. The dominant culture, which views a degree as the key to decent employment, may also be partly responsible for the lack of cooperation. If it's about degrees, then it's about education, and that falls under provincial jurisdiction. It is also possible that our poor performance when it comes to ongoing basic skills training might have something to do with our lack of awareness of best practices in other countries.

However, I believe that the main reason we are failing on this front is that governments in Canada have lacked the political will to establish the right partnerships. Bill S-256 would remedy the situation by generating the political will to engage in those partnerships.

[English]

This bill proposes that an essential skills framework be developed in partnership with the federal and provincial governments. Within one year of the date this bill comes into force, the Minister of Employment and Social Development must convene a conference with the provincial and territorial representatives responsible for the development of current and future workforce skills in order to develop the national framework for essential skills and to define specific targets.

In this process, the minister must take into account the following factors: one, the division of powers between federal, provincial and territorial authorities, including in matters of education, training, employment insurance and labour; two, the importance of stakeholder participation in essential skills development, including employers and labour representatives; three, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies; and finally, the specific needs of the various regions and communities, including Indigenous communities in relation to the development of essential workforce skills.

[Translation]

If passed, this bill will bring Canada back in line with other countries in building a solid infrastructure for developing the essential skills of today and tomorrow. This bill draws on the experience of the European Union and Australia, which have a long history of investing in essential skills development.

[English]

The first version of the Australian Core Skills Framework was introduced and developed with the industry in 2008. It was revised in 2012. Australian governments came together and introduced a national strategy to lift the skills of all Australians so they are prepared to face actual and future challenges. Signed by all governments in 2012, it proposed concrete targets such that two thirds of Australians would attain level 3 for literacy in 2022.

[Translation]

In 2006, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union adopted a recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning. Last May, the European Union revised the framework to factor in the new realities of the 21st century. Skills requirements are changing with the realities of the fourth Industrial Revolution, while technologies are playing a bigger role in every aspect of life.

For those reasons, the new European reference framework now includes eight key competences. I will read them to you so that we can compare them to the old essential skills adopted in Canada in 2008. The eight competences are: literary competence; multilingual competence; mathematical competence and competence in science, technology, and engineering; digital competence; personal, social and learning to learn competence; citizenship competence; entrepreneurial competence; and cultural awareness and expression competence.

In the European Union's recommendation, it is agreed that the new foundation of key competences will have to be maintained throughout a person's life through diverse formal and informal learning approaches. This learning will also have to be suitably evaluated and certified.

If the members of the European Union and the Australian government could work it out, why not us? There is no time to lose. We need to figure out the steps we can take to adapt to the labour market disruptions that will be caused by the rise of artificial intelligence and the shift to a greener, more diversified economy, as shown by the GM plant closures announced this week in the auto sector.

Before I wrap up my speech, I would like to say a few words about how people can acquire basic skills.

These skills can be taught to young people as part of their basic schooling. Several provinces are working on incorporating these skills into their curricula. Through the Council of Ministers of Education, the provinces are working together to share their experiences with comprehensive competencies. Adults can also take a formal or informal approach to acquiring these skills, but for working adults, the workplace is the best place to perfect their basic skills. Unfortunately, workplace-based learning is not very advanced, as I said.

Apart from trades regulated by the Red Seal program, workplace learning is anemic. To meet this challenge, it is absolutely crucial to have a framework for essential skills that can be combined with specific training. We need to make workplace investments in training a better investment for employers since it would lead to qualifications and transferable skills. This would help many people enter the labour market, including youth, immigrants and First Nations people. Under those circumstances, investing would be economically and financially advantageous to governments. Everybody would win: the worker, the business and society.

In conclusion, if Bill S-256 is passed, it will encourage private and public investment in essential skills training and consequently in human capital. The bill fits in with the global trend of continuing education for adults and addresses several concerns deemed to be urgent by various economic and technical and applied training groups. It presents a third pillar of adult education, as the Advisory Council on Economic Growth recommended in its report entitled *Learning Nation: Equipping Canada's Workforce with Skills for the Future*. It also reflects the recommendations of Colleges and Institutes Canada, which recommended at its 2013 leaders forum that the quality of practices for developing literacy and essential skills be enhanced by adopting a framework that defines what employers and individuals are entitled to expect in terms of essential skills improvement and that can be used to measure performance.

[English]

This bill is also consistent with the recommendations of the RBC report entitled *Humans Wanted: How Canadian Youth Can Thrive in the Age of Disruption*, such as the need for standardized labour market information across all provinces and regions and the introduction of a national initiative to help employers measure foundational skills and incorporate them in recruiting, hiring and training practices.

[Translation]

This bill follows up on the recommendations that the OECD made in its *Skills for a Digital World* report and in a number of other reports.

Colleagues, I urge you to quickly pass this bill at second reading so that it can be sent to committee for an in-depth study. Canada needs an essential skills framework developed through a federal-provincial partnership in order to make the most of existing private and public investment in continuing education. It is also an important piece of the puzzle to stimulate economic diversification in all regions across Canada and to help all Canadians meet the challenges of the 21st century. Thank you.
