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CHALLENGES OF LITERACY AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Speech by:

The Honourable Diane Bellemare

Tuesday, February 27, 2018

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

CHALLENGES OF LITERACY AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Hon. Diane Bellemare (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate) rose pursuant to notice of February 13, 2018:

That she will call the attention of the Senate to the challenges of literacy and essential skills for the 21st century in Canada, the provinces and the territories.

She said: Honourable senators, I rise today to call the attention of the Senate to the challenges of literacy and essential skills for the 21st century in Canada.

[English]

Let me begin by thanking all senators who have spoken on this matter, either recently or in the past. I'm thinking in particular of Senators Fairbairn, Callbeck, Hubley, Cordy, Griffin, Hartling and Ringuette as well as Senators Demers and McIntyre. I hope I have not forgotten anyone.

In 1987, a survey entitled "Broken Words" revealed that more than 5 million adults in Canada, about 24 per cent of the working age population, were functionally illiterate. Five million. As you know today, in order to be able to cope with our complex world, it is no longer enough to know how to read, write and count. Is Canada truly ready to adapt to and take advantage of new technologies like artificial intelligence?

[Translation]

During my brief speaking time today, I will address three questions. What conclusions can we draw from official statistics about Canadians' literacy and essential skills? Should we be concerned about this? Can we do better?

I would like to begin by defining literacy and essential skills. In other words, what essential skills do people need if they want to live and work decently in the 21st century?

As Senator Harder pointed out, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills identifies nine essential skills. They are reading, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, digital skills and continuous learning. For its part, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD, focuses on literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in a technological environment. The OECD defines literacy as something broader than reading. It is the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential.

These basic skills are not easy to measure. That is why research organizations such as the OECD and Statistics Canada use survey data based on testing of the working age population. The tests

measure three groups of skills: literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments.

The results I will be discussing come from the latest international survey conducted by the OECD with the participation of Canada, the United States, and other countries. It is called the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies and is known by its acronym PIAAC. The survey was held from 2011 to 2012. The provinces and territories took part in it, as did 24 other countries. In 2015, other countries became involved in this international survey.

• (1730)

PIAAC is therefore the most up-to-date official source on literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments. What are the main findings for Canada? First, the results for literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments indicate that, generally, Canada performed above average by international standards.

[English]

Canada performed above average among G7 countries for the three competencies, but it was largely surpassed by Japan and other non-G7 countries, such as Finland, the Netherlands, Australia, Sweden, Norway and others. In fact, Canada did not break through the top 10 countries in terms of essential skills.

[Translation]

Canadians' essential skills can certainly be improved. On a scale of 0 to 5, Canadians' average score did not reach level 3. Just like the Conference Board, I would say, as a former teacher, that this is a C.

Let's take a closer look at literacy. Nearly one in five Canadians between the ages of 16 and 65, or 17 per cent of the working-age population, has a very low level of competency in literacy, scoring at level 1 or below. This means that 4.1 million people have serious problems with literacy. They have difficulty reading a simple text and finding identical information. They need help. It would seem that Canada has made little progress in this area since 1987.

Almost 49 per cent of Canadians obtained scores under the proficiency level required to function well in society. That is the level 3 that I mentioned. Thus, 49 per cent of Canadians failed to attain the level 3 threshold. We are talking about 11.8 million people aged 16 to 65. According to the OECD, these people do not have the minimum skills required to obtain a secondary school diploma and to find a decent job. They often have diplomas, but according to the statistics, when they have to take tests, these people do not meet today's requirements for decent employment, either because they are old or they have problems.

In terms of numeracy, 55 per cent of the working-age population have a level of 3 out of 5, which is the minimum level required to function in the job market. As for the ability to evolve in technology-rich environments, 64 per cent of Canadians rate between 0 and 1 on a scale of 0 to 3.

Canadians are, however, doing well in terms of education. Canadian high school, college and university diplomas are well respected internationally. In short, we may be highly educated, but we could be more skilled.

Second, the results of this international survey indicate that in Canada, the average means nothing. Canada has larger proportions of people who have very few skills and others who are rated at the top, compared to other countries.

[English]

In other words, the results suggest large disparities or inequalities in the distribution of skills in Canada.

[Translation]

The disparities among the provinces are worrisome. Alberta and Prince Edward Island have the highest literacy rates, followed by Yukon and British Columbia. The problems are the most serious in Nunavut, where 24 per cent of residents have a skill level below 1, and where 56 per cent of residents have a skill level below 3. I remind senators that 3 is the minimum level required today to get a decent job.

My home province of Quebec, the second most-populated province, posted figures below the OECD and Canadian averages. Quebec ranked 9th out of 13, which includes all of the provinces and territories. For example, in literacy, 50 per cent of working-age Quebecers have not achieved the desired minimum level. This is more than half of working-age Quebecers, or 2.5 million people, according to the Conseil de l'éducation du Québec.

[English]

In fact, closer analysis suggests significant differences between a number of demographic groups such as immigrants, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, people who are unemployed or who have never had paid employment, seniors, as well as groups with a low level of education. There are few differences between men and women, with the exception of numeracy skills, where men perform better.

The third and final observation is surprising. In fact, a C.D. Howe study published in November 2017 — a study using the official data of the OECD — indicated that although Canadians are still more educated than in the past, there was a decline in the levels of literacy and numeracy of the Canadian population between 2003 and 2012.

[Translation]

Literacy and numeracy levels actually declined between 2003 and 2012 for native-born Canadians in all age groups except among those over the age of 55, whose performance was already weak. Scores also declined for all levels of education, even for Canadians with a university education. This decline in essential skill levels deserves our attention. Why are Canadian-born adults having more problems with literacy, numeracy and digital skills even though they are more educated? Is education quality declining? Is the pace of technological change a factor? Have computers and the Internet made us lazy? Or does the problem lie with the study methodology? This is something researchers need to investigate.

Are Canadians ready to face the social and economic challenges of the 21st century? Esteemed colleagues, you already know the short answer. Although some people are able to adapt easily, a very large number of people are not and may be left behind if society does not address this situation. That is why we must take action.

[English]

If we do not want to exclude a substantial portion of the population from the benefits of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, we must take into account now the challenges we face in the fields of literacy, numeracy, digital skills and other basic skills essential in today's world not only to get a good job but also to benefit from them as a citizen, consumer and user.

[Translation]

Acquiring essential skills enables people to get ahead in life. It also stimulates the economy. This is both a social and an economic problem.

[English]

Economists from Statistics Canada did an in-depth study on the contribution of literacy to economic growth. The study found:

... investment in human capital, that is, in education and skills training, is three times as important to economic growth over the long run as investment in physical capital, such as machinery and equipment. The results also show that direct measures of human capital based on literacy scores perform better than years-of-schooling indicators when explaining growth in output per capita and per worker.

• (1740)

[Translation]

From there, a group of economists, including well known Quebec economist Pierre Fortin, estimated that every one percentage point increase in the literacy rate in Canada would lead to a 2.5 per cent increase in productivity, or an increase in national revenue of more than \$32 billion annually.

A study published last week by economist Pierre Langlois, conducted for the Literacy Foundation and the Fonds de solidarité FTQ, estimated that if Quebec's literacy rates caught up to Ontario's, the province's GDP would increase by 1.4 per cent annually.

The Hon. the Speaker: Senator, your time is up. Would you like five more minutes?

Senator Bellemare: Yes, please.

The Hon. the Speaker: Is leave granted, honourable senators?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator Bellemare: Thank you.

The advent of technology such as artificial intelligence will cause greater income inequality and disparity if nearly half of Canadians cannot use it. Some provinces and territories will go

through an economic downturn in their region if a high proportion of their population is unable to adapt to the changes.

We could ask ourselves whether we should be doing more than we are and the answer is yes, but what should we do?

[*English*]

This is not an easy question, but at least Canadians — and we have a role to play — have to be aware of the situation in Canada. We have to be aware, and then we have to look at best practices.

[*Translation*]

Review of the practices used elsewhere reveals a number of options. I will come back to that some other time. The European Union is proposing some very interesting solutions, as are Australia, Sweden, and other Nordic countries that are posting better results. They too are offering nationwide results.

However, I would like to close by saying that Canada should pay close attention to what is being done in Australia, because, like us, Australia is a federation where the states play a major role in training and education. Let's take a quick look at what Australia is doing, and do keep in mind that it is faring better than we are.

First, the states and the central government, in other words all levels of the Australian government, worked together to adopt a national strategy on the development of basic skills in the context of continuing education. It is a shared national objective. Second, this strategy has concrete objectives, namely to ensure that two-thirds of the working age population achieve literacy and numeracy skills at level 3 or above by 2022. Third, this strategy

involves all economic and social stakeholders, including educational institutions, NGOs, businesses, and unions. Finally, this strategy involves implementing common tools across the country to promote both formal and informal training and the recognition of skills acquired as part of lifelong learning.

In closing, Canadians do not have the basic skill levels required to meet the challenges of the 21st century. It is urgent that Canada implement a basic skills development and continuing education strategy in partnership with the provinces and all relevant stakeholders. That is the message of the most recent report of the Advisory Council on Economic Growth, which is chaired by Mr. Dominic Barton. The report is entitled *Learning Nation: Equipping Canada's Workforce with Skills for the Future*, and it states, and I quote:

It is time to fundamentally rethink how we equip Canadians for the work dynamics of the future. Meeting this challenge will require a system-wide approach, and active collaboration between employers, citizens, educational institutions, and governments. In essence, we must develop mechanisms that support Canadians on continuous learning journeys throughout their lives.

Dear colleagues, thank you for your attention. I encourage everyone to take part in the debate on this inquiry. I will come back to this matter at a later date. In my view, it is very important to the future of Canada and Canadians.

(On motion of Senator Gagné, debate adjourned.)

(At 5:45 p.m., the Senate was continued until tomorrow at 2 p.m.)
