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## **PROMOTION OF ESSENTIAL SKILLS LEARNING WEEK BILL**

**SECOND READING—DEBATE ADJOURNED**

Speech by:

The Honourable Diane Bellemare

Tuesday, October 23, 2018

## THE SENATE

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[Translation]

### PROMOTION OF ESSENTIAL SKILLS LEARNING WEEK BILL

SECOND READING—DEBATE ADJOURNED

**Hon. Diane Bellemare (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate)** moved second reading of Bill S-254, An Act to establish Promotion of Essential Skills Learning Week.

She said: Honourable senators, I rise today to commence second reading of the first bill that I introduced in this chamber. I have been a senator for six years, and this is the first bill that I have introduced. I am very proud of it. It is Bill S-254, An Act to establish Promotion of Essential Skills Learning Week.

Before I begin my speech, I would like to point out that this very simple bill addresses a very complex reality. As we enter what the World Economic Forum refers to as the “fourth industrial revolution,” essential skills development is a priority and an urgent matter for Canada and every country in the world.

Essential skills development is now a necessity for any individual who wants to succeed throughout their career in the labour market. However, it is a subject that no one broaches during election campaigns because it is too complicated. Our capacity to adapt to constant change over the course of our working lives is directly related to the level of our core competencies.

[English]

Unfortunately, Canada suffers from a shortage of essential skills that threatens our prosperity. This is mainly because the system for developing essential skills needs more coherence. It needs a concerted action plan.

[Translation]

In order to achieve that goal, we need political leadership at the national level.

[English]

This bill is the first of two aiming to build a collective will to address this issue.

[Translation]

Getting back to Bill S-254, which designates the week beginning on the first Monday of October as Promotion of Essential Skills Learning Week, yes, it's true that the scope of these bills aimed at raising awareness about a topic deemed important is highly symbolic. These bills do not provide for any specific actions by governments, and their scope depends largely on any persuasive impact they might have on the groups and stakeholders involved by encouraging them to take advantage of a specific time to work together and promote positive messages to the general public and other stakeholders.

[English]

Nevertheless, symbols aside, such a law can serve as an anchor, a moment and a place in time that will allow people, businesses, unions, institutions or governments who are interested in this issue to come together and raise awareness among the general population, call attention to the importance of the issue and create synergies around a given problem.

[Translation]

This bill underscores how urgent it is for all Canadians to upgrade their skills to meet the challenges of today's and tomorrow's economy. It is also designed to spark a social dialogue among the various stakeholders. The bill is also a step towards meeting the sustainable development objectives in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This bill is fully constitutional because it is about promoting essential skills learning. It in no way infringes on provincial jurisdictions, since it has to do with labour market information.

UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, established an action plan entitled Agenda for the Future, which included the creation of the Week of Adult Learning. The countries that signed the declaration, including Canada, were to create an annual celebration of learning to promote the social gains associated with adult learning activities and encourage individuals to participate in them. In 1999, UNESCO adopted a resolution to officially launch the Week of Adult Learning in order to promote the broadened concept of lifelong education. A decade later, nearly 40 countries, including Canada celebrated learning around the world. In Canada, Adult Learners' Week was celebrated across the country for the first time from September 8 to 14, 2002. The Canadian Commission for UNESCO participated in those celebrations in cooperation with the Council of Ministers of Education Canada and various non-governmental organizations.

Unfortunately, the national promotion of this week has slowly fallen by the wayside in recent years and the commission's activity reports published after 2013 make no mention of this event.

Since then, it seems that fewer provincial activities have been held as well. For example, in my province, the last time Quebec Adult Learners Week was celebrated was in 2014.

Some organizations, such as Literacy Nova Scotia and ABC Life Literacy Canada, have continued to make efforts to celebrate adult education. In fact, a motion to celebrate an adult education week was adopted by the Nova Scotia legislature on April 5, 2018, proclaiming the week of April 1 to 7 Adult Learners' Week.

Still, efforts are being made here and there across the provinces, and some have been more active than others. It is also apparent that the dates of the celebrations have not been standardized.

Nevertheless, there are a number of major learning festivals around the world, including Lifelong Learning Week in Europe, the Festival of Learning in the United Kingdom, the SkillsFuture

Festival in Singapore, and Adult Learners' Week in Australia. In the United States, the U.S. Senate adopted a motion in 2017 to celebrate literacy and basic skills training.

[English]

Senate resolution 277 designates the week of September 25 through 29, 2017, as National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week.

[Translation]

Why designate the week beginning on the first Monday in October as promotion of essential skills learning week? Because the date is close to the start of the school year and because groups I consulted, such as Colleges and Institutes Canada and the Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec agreed with the suggestion. However, the date could be the subject of broader consultation during the committee's study of the bill, should it get to that stage, with a view to optimizing synergies.

Esteemed colleagues, it is very important to emphasize that the main goal of Bill S-254 is to engage the collective leadership we need in Canada to create the tools and a strategy to develop the essential skills of all Canadians.

At the end of its leaders forum on March 19 and 20, 2013, Colleges and Institutes Canada made the following recommendation:

Literacy and essential skills should be a national priority. Leadership should come from governments, the education sector, literacy organizations, employers and unions.

The Advisory Council on Economic Growth released a report entitled "Learning Nation: Equipping Canada's Workforce with Skills for the Future," which was sent to the Minister of Finance in December 2017. The report recommended immediately launching a national dialogue about skills development.

You might be wondering why this bill focuses on essential skills learning instead of adult education. Essential skills, which are also referred to as basic or fundamental skills, are necessary for entering the workforce and change over time. They are not the same today as they were yesterday, and they will be different in the future too. That means a person who wants to have a decent job for their whole life will have to constantly upgrade their basic skills.

[English]

This bill emphasizes the fact that essential skills are a moving target and a prerequisite for lifelong learning.

[Translation]

Following the example of efforts made internationally, the federal government has been working on identifying the essential skills people are expected to have in order to work and have a decent life in the 21st century. As many senators have already explained, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, created under the banner of Employment and Social Development Canada, has identified nine essential skills: reading, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking, digital skills and continuous learning. These essential skills are necessary to learn all other skills.

Over the past two decades, the notion of essential skills has been pervasive in the policies and initiatives of governments and various international organizations. All EU countries, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, many Asian countries, including China, and South American countries have implemented skills-development strategies. Many of them specifically target essential skills, which are also called basic or fundamental skills in the various countries.

The international literature indicates that experts and governments alike look at essential skills as a core asset of human capital and also consider them necessary to living a good life and finding decent employment.

[English]

The acquisition of essential skills allows for lifelong learning and helps individuals adapt to change. Without these skills, it is much more difficult for individuals to adapt to the never-ending changes in the labour market.

As many observers and economic stakeholders such as the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and the Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec have repeated, Canada is facing a skills crisis, and it is time to act on this issue.

[Translation]

The urgent need for action on essential skills reflects the magnitude of the economic and social challenges that all Canadian provinces and territories must overcome to ensure their citizens' current and future economic prosperity.

André Beaudry, vice-president of Canadian partnerships at the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, which is now Colleges and Institutes Canada, had this to say at the 2013 leaders forum:

To become a global leader in innovation and productivity, Canada must leverage the full potential of every one of its citizens. The current skills shortage will never be resolved if we do not address the lack of essential skills.

[English]

Skills development in the workforce is at the heart of economic, social and environmental challenges for Canada and the provinces and territories. Future skills development relies on our level of essential skills in literacy, numeracy and capacity to work in a digital environment.

[Translation]

In short, it is urgent that we focus on the development of essential skills, at least for three main reasons. First, essential skills are fundamental to our individual ability to adapt to change, whether technological, economic or even environmental, and to hold a decent job throughout one's life.

Second, Canadians' performance in this regard leaves something to be desired. My inquiry, in which Senator Cormier and Senator Gagné participated, shows that, on average, almost one in two Canadians of working age does not have the minimum skills to find a decent job. This means that every second person who loses their job today risks ending up in a precarious job at a place like McDonald's or a retail store.

Skills shortages in Quebec and the Maritime provinces are even worse than the Canadian average. Furthermore, a recent study from the C.D. Howe Institute, which I mentioned in my inquiry, revealed that essential skill levels have been declining since 2000 for Canadians of all ages.

Third, as some economic studies have indicated, these essential skills are absolutely necessary if we want to maintain our standard of living in Canada and if we want the middle class to survive.

[English]

Moreover, a lack of essential skills prevents a significant segment of the population, especially vulnerable people — among them the young, immigrants and Indigenous people — from finding decent work.

Consequently, if Canada does not address the issue of essential skills, unemployment will prevail while qualified labour shortages will increase, thus weakening Canada's competitiveness in the global economy and threatening our prosperity.

[Translation]

Essential skills learning is not simply an educational issue. It is a real economic and social challenge.

[English]

All of the above reasons explain why it is so urgent to adopt an essential skills learning week. We need a national conversation on this issue that will lead us to collective action.

[Translation]

Canada does not actually have an organized system for developing essential skills that could help us meet this challenge.

[English]

To this effect, the Advisory Council on Economic Growth, created by Minister of Finance Bill Morneau and chaired by Dominic Barton, expressed the following concern in 2017:

Canada's skills development infrastructure is simply not equipped to meet the challenges that lie ahead. Our system today rests primarily on two pillars. The first one supports the development of skills before people enter the workforce, through K-12 and post-secondary education. The second pillar supports individuals when they leave the workforce, by providing assistance to the unemployed and the retired. That leaves a large gap in institutional support and training during Canadians' most productive years — and it is in this phase that workers will be most affected by the labour market turmoil. While our system has served us well in a relatively stable environment to date, it is not set up to address the coming labour-market disruptions.

[Translation]

A comparative analysis of skills development systems around the world, conducted by Professor Matthias Pilz of the University of Cologne in Germany, differentiates the skills development systems according to whether they are decentralized or centralized, dominated by the state, business or individuals, or standardized or non-standardized. According to this study, there are many similarities between the Canadian and American

systems. These two systems are very different from the systems of Germany, France, India, China, Japan and Mexico. The Canadian and American systems are decentralized and individualized. This means that in both systems, neither the state nor business exercise leadership in this area.

In Canada, the lifelong skills development system is associated with provincial education networks, the networks of community groups responsible for employability, personal initiative and the market of private training companies. Education networks and colleges do an excellent job with youth and collaborate with businesses. Community groups also do excellent and necessary work and address the most pressing needs. However, these institutions cannot meet the demand.

Moreover, businesses invest little compared to businesses around the world. The most recent data from the Conference Board of Canada shows that Canadian businesses invest even less than American businesses in the United States.

Daniel Munro from the Conference Board of Canada said, and I quote:

[English]

Surveys of Canadian organizations for the Conference Board's Learning and Development Outlook show that employer spending on training and development has declined by about 40 per cent over the past two decades. When employers believe they can externalize skills development to formal education systems, they feel less urgency to make training investments with their own limited resources.

[Translation]

Not only is our skills development system decentralized, but it is also not standardized. In other words, there is no common language to describe the nature, content and level of essential skills. There are no standards or frameworks to determine what type of training qualifies, how it is evaluated and what designation is awarded. As a result, aside from the training prescribed by professional associations and the education sector, learners do not get any recognition for investing in training. In addition, when a certificate is issued, there are no official equivalencies among the various certificates in Canada, or even within the same province.

[English]

In fact, our system of education and skills development does not provide individuals with the possibility to establish a coherent, recognized learning plan nor the possibility for businesses to offer their employees training qualifications that are transferable and recognized equally among different provincial and territorial jurisdictions.

[Translation]

Another study entitled *Why Firms Do and Don't Offer Apprenticeships*, which was conducted by Robert Lerman, offered a comparative analysis of the investments that multinational firms make in training. It found that offers of apprenticeships are more common in countries where knowledge about apprenticeships is widespread, occupational standards are

well developed, and governments finance training. Could these factors explain why Canadian businesses invest so little in training their workforce?

Colleagues, in my past life, I was the CEO of the Société québécoise de développement de la main d'œuvre, and I was responsible for implementing the Act to Promote Workforce Skills Development and Recognition in Quebec in 1996, which requires that businesses invest 1 per cent of their total payroll in training their employees. I was also responsible for implementing a dual vocational training system in Quebec, which was very difficult to do, so this issue struck a chord with me. My first-hand experience and my readings support the theory that businesses invest more in training and education when training is standardized and when the government is also investing in training workers.

In Canada, investments in continuing education are not standardized against a skills framework, which means that many of those investments are not recognized or certified. That obviously has an impact on private investment.

[English]

I will ask you a question. Would you invest in something that has no recognition, no value recognized or certified? Would you invest in that kind of an activity? I don't think so. This is why there is a lot of underinvestment in learning in Canada.

[Translation]

In Canada, unlike the education system, skills development receives limited public investment. Apart from funding allocated to unemployed workers who have paid enough into the EI system, not enough public investments are being made specifically to develop essential skills among unemployed youth, Indigenous peoples, immigrants and working Canadians. Is it any wonder that Canada is performing so poorly in this area?

What else can I say about why we need to establish a promotion of essential skills learning week?

Personal responsibility is often considered and often cited as a factor in continuous learning, as demonstrated by the motion adopted by the U.S. Senate.

In reality, it is increasingly obvious in the 21st century that lifelong development of essential skills is a shared responsibility and a public asset, in the same vein as education. In the 21st century, skills development is carried out through the education network, which must teach children and youth how to learn. However, lifelong skills development extends beyond school. It is based on a collective will that recognizes that there are different ways to learn. We can learn by working, we can learn informally, and we can learn on our own. However, the effectiveness of all these efforts requires a skills framework that will can be used to measure the results of these efforts, rather than the process followed.

There needs to be a paradigm shift about continuing education in order to make investments in this area that are relevant, transferable and therefore recognized. Does adopting a promotion of essential skills learning week go far enough to meet this challenge? Of course not. The provinces, territories and Canada as a whole will have to do much more than devote a week to essential skills. They will have to come together to develop a common strategy. As my colleagues Senators Gagné and Cormier have pointed out, it will be necessary to adopt a concerted strategy on the matter. That is why I will soon be introducing a second bill to develop a national framework for essential skills, one that respects the constitutional jurisdictions of the provinces. This second bill will also address the problem raised by the Minister of Finance's advisory council, which found the following:

Confronting the major labour-market disruptions ahead means incorporating a third pillar into the current system of education and unemployment support: one focused on continuous upgrading of working adults' skills. It is a big challenge that will not be addressed overnight.

Until then, colleagues, I urge you to waste no time referring this bill to a committee for further study.

Thank you for your attention, and I would like to thank my team, the Library of Parliament staff and the law clerks who helped me draft this bill. Thank you very much.

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