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| Manitoba | 38e | 4e | Discours relatif à l’Éducation | 7 novembre 2005 | Peter Bjornson | Ministre de l’Éducation, de la Citoyenneté et de la Jeunesse | NDP |

Hon. Peter Bjornson (Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth): I am very pleased to stand in the House today to put my comments on the record regarding the main motion. At this time, I would also like to say hello to you, Mr. Speaker. It is great to be back in the House and I extend greetings as well to our two pages today. We have Monica De Castro and, of course, Chad Jacobson, a student at Gimli High School. I am very pleased to see them here today. As pages, you are going to have a wonderful experience here in the Legislature.

Mr. Speaker, the previous speaker, the member from Charleswood, said that there was no excitement about the Throne Speech and it was interesting to hear her take on body language. Well, I will try not to contain myself so much next time around because I, for one, as are all members on this side of the House, am very excited about what was in the Throne Speech. We are very pleased to be bringing forward the Throne Speech this time.

What I would like to talk about in the Throne Speech, we talked about the preparing for emergencies, Mr. Speaker, and the actions of this government this year being very proactive to address some very serious concerns in the municipalities in the south basin of Manitoba. It was a clear, proactive approach to averting disaster, and yet the Tory press release said with the expansion of the floodway, we are expecting to see an increased water flow into the south basin of Lake Winnipeg and that this could lead to flooding of those properties if the Premier does not increase their flood protection. Flood protection should have been considered, he says. It is clear that the Tories do not have an understanding of this issue. I have lived by the lake all my life, and when you have 300 000 cubic metres of water per second coming into the lake, and 160 000 cubic metres of water per second leaving the lake, it has nothing to do with expanding the floodway. That water is going to come into the south basin either way.

Now, we were very proactive with an $8-million commitment to dikes and flood protection and the citizens of Gimli, along with a number of people who rose to the occasion to help from various schools in Winnipeg, put in a lot of volunteer time. In fact, I was joined by my colleague from Wolseley, and the Premier himself was down filling some sandbags. There was a lot of effort to bring forward all the protective measures necessary to avoid what could have been a very, very bad situation with the waters being at 30-year levels, and with the 1-in-10 windstorm, it was a perfect storm, and it could have been quite a disaster, Mr. Speaker, so we were very proactive in our approach to dealing with that.

I also take exception to the comments made in the House today about the so-called closure of the emergency services at Gimli hospital. As the Minister of Health (Mr. Sale) has said, the emergency services are available. It is not being closed, and it is insulting to the people of the Interlake Regional Health Authority who are working to ensure that service is not compromised in the situation, Mr. Speaker. We are committed to ensure that it is not and that the citizens of Gimli are going to be well served by our health care system.

Now, in the limited time that I have, I would like to talk about education as my portfolio here, and some of the things that I heard from members opposite which I found quite disturbing. In my experience as minister, I have observed that there are two things that define the members opposite with respect to education. Essentially, it is a one-trick pony. That is, it is always about financing; it is always about taxes. That is the one-trick pony that members opposite bring into this House with anything meaningful on education.

The second thing that defines members opposite is essentially a three-ring circus when it comes to consultation because we have some members saying, "Oh, make sure you talk to the teachers," other members saying, "It's a waste of time to talk to anybody about this issue," and other members of the party opposite saying, "Disregard everything that everyone said in consultation and do what we say." So it has been very interesting to watch this dynamic with the members opposite with respect to education issues.

What I have heard so far in throne speeches from members opposite is they keep saying, "Oh, you mention 1999 17 times in the Throne Speech." Well, maybe I could talk a little bit about history and refresh members opposite. My critic just said how, as a mother, she is absolutely, oh, very, very angry that we do not do the right things for their children. Well, let us talk about the right things that have been done for the children since 1999. But members opposite also were lamenting the fact that we did not talk about anything prior to 1999, so we will talk about 1995.

In 1995, Mr. Speaker, January 16, the announcement for education and training and the government support to public schools would be unchanged from the 1994-95 level. A zero percent announcement followed two years of announced reductions of minus 2 percent and minus 2.6 percent for a total reduction of $34 million. Now, I cannot see how members opposite can possibly say that that was right for children. 1995 was the year that 243 teachers, a record number of teachers, were given a pink slip; 243 teachers in May of 1995. Now, obviously, that cannot be right for children because we are seeing an increase in class sizes, and we are seeing a lack of commitment by the members opposite to fund the education system.

If you go back to that time frame you also have all the reduced work week legislation when members opposite gave school boards the authority to lock teachers out of the classroom. Many school divisions did that. Why did they do that? To save money. Why would they be forced to save money? Because you had announcements that saw a net decrease of $34 million, Mr. Speaker. Why would they lock out teachers when teachers needed to be involved in professional development, when teachers needed to be engaged in professional dialogue with other teachers and when teachers needed administrative time for all the things that they were trying to get accomplished in the schools? Because they were being grossly underfunded by members opposite. At the same time they put a cap on taxation.

We talk about school safety. In 1993 when I was a member of the Evergreen Teachers' Association, the Manitoba Teachers' Society was saying to members opposite, "We need to do something about safety issues in the school." Yet they chose to do nothing, Mr. Speaker. They chose to do nothing. The member from Charleswood stands up in the House and has to say, "Well, we have to do what's right for kids." It is really interesting that that would come from a Tory opposition when what they were doing in the 1990s to our school divisions was absolutely appalling, a complete abandonment of the public school system, nothing short of that.

So, yes, I guess if you want to talk about prior to 1999, we could talk about it, but I think, Mr. Speaker, that the truth hurts. As a teacher, I was absolutely appalled by what was happening to our school system. I think it is no coincidence that there are currently almost a dozen teachers on these benches of the government of Manitoba because of what was happening to our school system and how our public school system had been abandoned.

Now, since 1999, since 1999, if we address the one-trick-pony issue of the property taxes, our record is very clear, Mr. Speaker. In the 1990s there is a trend. Property taxes kept going up, 68 percent; property values remained static. Since that time, since 1999, property taxes are relatively flat, property values have gone up, and that is because of the good work that we have been doing as a government, recognizing the need for change. That need for change has included a commitment to eliminate one of the two property taxes that are on housing right now with respect to education support levies, and we are committed to eliminate the provincial Education Support Levy.

We recognized the need to increase the property tax credit, which we have done, from $250 to $325 in 1999 and up to $400 in the year 2000, crediting over $179 million to homeowners. As the so-called champions of the farm community, it was our government that, in 2002, decreased the portioning on farmland that resulted in $7 million in annual savings from farmers with respect to education taxes and, of course, the farmland school tax rebate. Our commitment has been very clear, and we have exceeded what we originally promised we would do in that regard.

So let us look at that one-trick pony on taxes. It is very clear. In five years, the net contribution of members opposite, the net contribution after cutting the contributions to education system and one token increase, the net contribution to the entire education system in the province of Manitoba was $1.6 million in five years. Our contribution as a government since we have been in office since 1999 is $129.8 million. We could not run one of the programs, we could not run one of our new initiatives, with $1.6 million in one year never mind over five years. It is absolutely appalling how the members opposite completely abandoned the public school system.

Now, Mr. Speaker, it is rather curious, because they talk about how we need to fund more and we need to fund more, and it has been identified in the House that Monday, Wednesday, Friday, is spend, spend, spend; Tuesday, Thursday is cut taxes, cut taxes, cut taxes. I hear many people ask about building new schools. Well, certainly that is a good problem to have, that we have growth in this province, and we do need to build new schools. When you are firing 243 teachers and people are leaving the province in record numbers in the 1990s, you did not need to build schools, I guess, because it was reflected in their announcements. Prior to 1999, we had announcements of $18.3 million for capital. That was a couple of the announcements from members opposite when we had over 700 schools that were–you know, roofs were leaking, boilers needed to be replaced. We have inherited a serious infrastructure deficit that we have been trying to address. So funding under the previous administration, $172 million; funding under our administration, $333 million. You have to ask who is the government that is committed to seeing improved infrastructure in the province of Manitoba. That would be this government.

You know, we were able to do this in our balanced budget legislation, Mr. Speaker. We were able to do this. The member from Radisson, the member from Burrows, they both referenced in their speeches a report from Ottawa that says: "New Democrats Most Fiscally Responsible, Federal Government Report, February 23, 2005. The New Democratic Party governments have the best fiscal track record among all parties, balancing the books more than twice as often as Liberal governments." It is in the report. This is a government that is committed to being fiscally responsible and providing the services and the infrastructure that Manitobans want, and this is what we have been doing and we have been doing it successfully.

(Mr. Conrad Santos, Deputy Speaker, in the Chair)

Now, again, one of the issues that was raised by the members opposite, one of the issues that was raised by the member from Charleswood, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was marks, towards the end of the speech. It was almost like it was an afterthought. As Education critic, maybe something should be said about education, perhaps. So the member from Charleswood talked about marks and how we were slipping, allegedly. Well, first of all, she also was a little dismissive of some comments that were made that were in an editorial, but, of course, there are a lot of things that were not included in that editorial that I had spoken about in light of some of the results in sciences.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have been doing a lot to improve the quality of education in this province, and we have been doing a lot to assess our students and their abilities. But the member from Charleswood does not understand this process because it is a formative, student-led, classroom-based assessment process that we are engaged in right now. It is assessment as learning, assessment for learning, and learning by assessment. That is what we have been doing with our new pilot project in the Grade 8 assessments.

It is not about marks. Yes, there is some merit to standardize tests, and we recognize that. That is why we continue to have standardized tests in Senior 4 in the English, and that is why we continue to have standardized tests in math. But we have a regimen of assessment that includes the Grade 3 assessment, the Grade 8 assessment, the PISA results that have shown that Manitoba consistently fairs very well.

What we are committed to on this side of the House is providing resources that create a very robust education system that meet the needs of our students, and, yes, we do have one of the best music programs, and I am proud of that fact. The member from Charleswood should be proud of the fact that we do have one of the best music programs because there is literature that supports the idea that learning through the arts draws out a lot of the cognitive abilities of students and enhances their ability to learn. So I was rather surprised that the member from Charleswood would be so dismissive of that.

Our job as a government, as a Department of Education, is to provide every student in Manitoba an opportunity to succeed, and we have to provide a school system that has as many opportunities presented to them to succeed. That is our commitment on this side of the House, and we are doing that by funding education at the rate of economic growth, by ensuring that we do not see days where 243 teachers are let go in one fell swoop with an omnibus pink slip because of the funding announcement. We are committed to funding our education system in a meaningful way so we can provide students with those opportunities.

Now, I have had the opportunity as minister, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to visit so many schools, and I hear a lot of good things from teachers. I ask for feedback from teachers on what we can be doing better. In fact, this morning I was at Archwood School, where they have a lot of multiple-age and multiple-class activities, mixed classes with a K to 3, 3 to 5, whatever the case might be, in whatever configuration, and they were saying how our department is doing exceptional work in providing the resource and the supports for students to succeed in that type of classroom setting. We have been recognized as leaders in the country with those types of initiatives on multigrade, multilevel opportunities for students.

Teachers are doing a great job. Teachers are very committed to the profession. We as a government are very committed to the education system.

So, when they talk about the Throne Speech 2005, I am very pleased to stand here on this side of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and talk about, as I said, the proactive measures we took in preparing for emergencies; the initiatives that we have for building on our clean energy environment. We are the building party, not the mothball party; how we have been delivering better health care; how we have all kinds of programs in place to combat crime; how we have initiated a number of different projects preparing children and youth for the future, and that is a commitment that starts, as mentioned by the Minister of Health (Mr. Sale), in the womb with the prenatal benefit. That is commitment. With our Healthy Child Committee of Cabinet, with the early development indicators, with the triple-P Positive Parenting Program, with the Roots Empathy program to address issues around bullying and addressing empathy in young children, with our commitment to the Safe Schools, we are preparing our students academically; we are preparing them socially. We have rewritten the curriculum in the social studies that talks about what it means to be a proactive, productive member of society working towards civics education through citizenship education.

Modernizing our post-secondary education and training, Growing Rural Manitoba, the headlines speak for themselves, and the subheadings speak for themselves in Throne Speech 2005. As I said, recognizing that my time is running out, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do visit a lot of schools, and I do not hear teachers say, "I long for the days of the Tory government when they were going to lock us out for 10 days." I do not hear teachers saying, "I long for the days when they were going to review our compensation through the Scurfield commission because they think that we are overpaid." I do not hear teachers saying, "I long for the days of minus 2.6 funding announcements." I do not hear teachers saying, "I long for the days when we were getting $18.3 million in capital," when we are putting $45 million every year into capital.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not hear that. I hear teachers all over Manitoba saying that the education system is on the right track. This government is committed to education, and I am very proud to be a part of this government and the 10 teachers that sit on this side of the House who are moving Manitoba forward.

With those comments, I, again, am very pleased to have had this opportunity, and it is a privilege and an honour to represent the citizens of Gimli. I look forward to the motion and moving forward on Throne Speech 2005. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.