

Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan
DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

(HANSARD)

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.Sitting Times for the Assembly and Standing Committees

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Harper): — I recognize the member from Saskatoon Centre.

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I rise today on this very odd day. It's a day that we're defending the rights of democracy, the majority here who's overruling and tearing apart some of the basic principles of democracy. And I find it very alarming. I've been here for over six years and this is a concern that I have.

And I want to start out by saying that I want to thank the speakers who have gone before me to highlight this issue. And they've repeated themselves maybe a couple of times, but I think we've learned an awful lot over the last couple of days. And I want to start by mentioning the member from Regina Dewdney and the member from Saskatoon Meewasin and the good work that they've done in highlighting the issues.

I want to repeat one of the quotes that the member from Dewdney started his speech with, and I think this is very, very important. Mr. Speaker, he was quoting from a book called "The Role of the Legislature," written by Merrilee Rasmussen. And he goes right to the conclusion. And he talks about the erosion of the legislature, the role of the legislature in the period from 1982 to 1991. And this is what it says.

This is the quote: The erosion of the legislature continues, albeit perhaps . . . more slowly than at times in the past. The Devine Conservatives believed that they had a majority of the seats in the legislature so they could do whatever they wanted.

And are we seeing history repeat itself today, this week. This is very, very sad when we see the tyranny of the majority and they are acting very much the same way.

Of course it's an interesting process that we're in. We're seeing a government that's caught by its incompetence going to attack some basic principles of democracy.

And so what are some of these incompetent, some of the things that they've done wrong? Well they want to change the rules of the Assembly. And it's nothing more than a cover-up. So a basic function of any government is to prepare legislation, write it, plan for it. But clearly they have not done their job here. It's only a basic function, and they really missed the opportunity to show what they're really made of. Or maybe they really are showing what they're made of.

This 11th-hour change is nothing more than an attempt to really cover up their mismanagement and a stunning incompetence. And they really want to get some of these pieces of legislation through. Now we have spoken up against some of them. But some of

them we've said, they're really some of the things that we were going to do because some of the things we've agreed to.

Now the Sask Party over there, they negotiated these changes when they were in opposition, but all of a sudden they're a problem. Didn't they understand the implications of what they were negotiating at that time? Well, Mr. Speaker, you'll hear it and over again, and we've heard over the past couple days about why are they so incompetent about some simple mathematics. These rules didn't sneak up on this government. They were in place when they were elected and they knew it. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they clearly knew the game when they got into it.

And they've said over and over again, they keep going back to their platform and saying, we're doing what we said we'd do. We got the book. We're going by the book. Well they also know what the rules were of this House. Why are they changing it now? Well as I said, Mr. Speaker, it's because of their own mismanagement and incompetence, you know.

And of course what we see is particularly a couple ministries that are having some difficulty. And one that I was involved with in the past government, the Department of Labour, we see some major changes. And just today in question period, we understand now that these are some of the most broad, far-reaching legislation changes in Canada. And they didn't quite plan it out the way they should have.

And they had opportunities to have public meetings, refer it to committee, but they've not taken that opportunity. In fact, Mr. Speaker, we know that we had the opportunity to meet in December and March, have evening sittings, but they didn't do that. Well, Mr. Speaker, they've really dropped the ball.

One area that I do want to talk about is, for example, where we see incompetence is particularly in the area of Social Services and the ministry there. Really, essentially, I think I'm on my fifth strike now. I've got to tell you about some of the things we've seen. Of course we were clearly disappointed to read and to hear the media reports of a meeting this morning that the Premier and the Minister of Health had with the folks from Station 20.

They went apparently to listen. It wasn't quite really listening. They apparently went to deliver a message, is more what it was, that it wasn't going to happen . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . It was on the website. You go to the *The StarPhoenix* website. It was on at 1 o'clock. Yes. Not a problem. So yes, you got to get with the program.

But anyway, so you had this Station 20 fiasco — 2,500 people on Saturday morning show up to say this is the right thing, this is community driven, this is a solution for issues that inner city people face in Saskatoon and in Regina. And we put this money forward over a year ago to revitalize communities . . .

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Harper): — Order. Order. If members wish to carry on a conversation, they may do so behind the bar. I recognize the member.

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you very much. So here they have a decision made on misinformation. And, Mr. Speaker, the housing issue, the housing issue — what a fiasco that's turning into, appointing a task force the day before the budget. They must have just opened up the budget book and realized, we're not doing anything. What can we do? Appoint a task force.

We see it in so many areas around the housing. We heard questions about SOS [Saskatoon Overnight Shelter]. They were promised money. Then it was taken away and there was confusion. What were the commitments made? I don't know. It's really alarming.

And, Mr. Speaker, I want to read into the record question no. 476. I just got this answer back just a couple of days ago:

To the Minister of Social Services: What housing community groups has the Minister met with between November 7, 2007 and March 19, 2008?

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how many people, how many groups do you think . . .

An Hon. Member: — 50.

Mr. Forbes: — 50 groups? No, a little lower than 50.

An Hon. Member: — 25.

Mr. Forbes: — 25? 25. No, you're not even warm. People are not warm in this House.

An Hon. Member: — Got to be at least 10.

Mr. Forbes: — Got to be 10? Got to be 10? You know what it is, Mr. Deputy Speaker? One. She met with one group, and this is the writing right here which they approved. She met with Passion for Action Against Homelessness.

Now we know the major cities. Saskatoon has a homelessness committee. Regina has one. I believe Moose Jaw, P.A. has one of which Sask Housing puts money forward to. There's at least four, all right? There are housing authorities right across this province. She chooses to meet with one group, one group. Now if that's not the height of incompetence, that is really bizarre, Mr. Speaker, really bizarre.

So and then we go on to the modernization strategy. Holy smoke, what a fiasco that was, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Here we have a situation on budget day, Social Services employees were brought together and told about this new strategy. I don't believe that was part of their plan, their platform. But the following week, we hear a back and forth, the minister knew, didn't know. She blamed the officials all over the map, but finally she reversed

that decision. But we're not clear, because of the press release, what it really means. What does it really mean? People are really, really worried about that. And of course I could talk about the disability, Council on Disability Issues — a huge, huge misstep early in January. So here you have a government that's going from, careening from one fiasco to another to another. And here we are where we find ourselves today.

Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what we need to do is really back up and take a look at the big picture because the ground level here looks like a bit like a disaster, and we may be missing the big picture. You know it's sort of like, you can't see the forest for the trees because you go, well it's just a discussion here, maybe we can just move on and just forget about this, it's early on in the mandate. But I tell you it's really setting the tone of their mandate, this heavy-handedness.

So I want to talk about some of these rule changes that they're putting forward and what that really means for democracy. It really is about parliamentary democracy and the rights of the members of this Assembly. This rule change is an abuse of power that reflects on the democratic principles of this institution and how it reflects upon the rights of Saskatchewan citizens to be heard in this Assembly, and that is so important. Day after day we bring forward petitions about Station 20. For example, 2,500 people gather, the largest demonstration in recent history in Saskatoon. You would probably have to go back to the '60s and '70s and then back to the '30s and '40s probably for the next largest group, next largest demonstration.

This is not a small thing, Mr. Deputy Speaker; this is a very important thing. People are not being heard. and our job as opposition is to bring that forward, to bring those concerns forward.

Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it's not only contrary to the principle of democracy, but it's also contrary to the way this Assembly has worked for many years. It's contrary to the principle of good leadership. Now over the past number of years, we've been able to negotiate things. And of course one of the things we're very proud is the negotiation of the rules changes which brought the committee structure into place.

I remember the days when we had estimates in this room, and we were all here captive to this process. We saw that this wasn't working, and we needed to be more relevant to the people of Saskatchewan. It would be in their best interests if we would work together, all members of this Assembly.

Well the true test of democracy is based on how this Legislative Assembly works, based on the rules of this Assembly. And the unilateral action of taking away the rules as they were put into place is shameful.

Now I want to quote Stanley Knowles, this is from "The Role of Opposition in Parliament," and I think this is very, very important:

Democracy includes respect for the rights of minorities. Democracy is not real unless the force of public opinion is brought to bear not only on the choice of a government once every four or five years but on the legislative process month in and month out, day in and day out, during the time between elections.

And that's true. People are not just watching us on election day and whether it was November 7, 2007. It's every day. It's every day.

Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, another part of democracy, the principles of democracy talk to the majority rule and minority rights. And I think last night we heard this most eloquently from the member from Meewasin and also the member of Dewdney. But I want to also reflect on this because I think this is very, very important — critical to the work we do. The integrity we have when we come into this House, it's just integrity and how we act here is so, so important.

Well majority rule is a means for organizing government and deciding public issues. It's not another road to oppression. Just as no self-appointed group has the right to oppress others, so no majority — not even in a democracy — should take away the basic rights and freedom of a minority group or individual.

Now it goes on:

Minorities need to trust that government will protect their rights and self identity. Once this is accomplished such groups can participate and contribute to the country's democratic institutions.

This is so true in this province of Saskatchewan where we have communities and people .

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know one of the things I've been doing and actually I have been doing this, reading a lot about this issue over the last couple of months because we see this as politicians how our constituents, not only in Saskatchewan but in Canada and around the world, are becoming disconnected to the kind of work we do. They feel that they have no power. They have no influence. They elect people, but they come here and somehow they're changed people. When they're out on the hustings they say all sorts of things, but they get here and all of a sudden they want to push things through.

Well there was a report published in the United Kingdom. It's called the power report and it was reported the political system of what's happening in the United Kingdom. And I think if we look over there — which in many ways we owe an awful lot to our parliamentary system — if we look at the tradition we come out of, of course clearly it's out of the system in the United Kingdom.

I just want to quote some of the things. One of the chapters talk about the reality of the electoral system and politics and how people feel disengaged, and I think this speaks clearly to our issue that we're debating tonight. The one factor, and I'll quote now:

The one factor felt to cause disengagement that runs through all strands of our investigation is a very widespread sense that citizens feel their view and interests are not taken sufficiently into account by the processes of political decision-making. It cannot be stressed enough the depth and extent of this perception amongst the British public. Many, if not all, of the other accepted explanations presented here could also be understood as variations on this theme of weak citizen influence.

So here we are representing citizens in . . . and clearly we're being stymied by this rule change tonight. It goes on to say:

"We are powerless against unaccountable individuals, why should anyone be interested in politics?"

"To vote, people need to feel that it achieves something more than just exercising a right. People want to feel that their vote makes a difference to their lives; for many this is not felt."

And I can tell you tonight, in downtown Saskatoon, in Riversdale and Pleasant Hill, they're going, what just happened to us? And it goes on to say, "It is just the fact people don't really think they make a difference." Some other quotes, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

"I think the politicians pay lip service to the public, they don't put our suggestions into practice."

"They pretend that we're involved and that, but you're not really."

"The first thing is, you've got to get somebody who'll listen and this is 90 per cent of the problem. You've got nobody to talk to."

"I feel as though they (politicians) don't want you involved."

"[And] (politics) is a closed shop. You don't feel you're being told the truth."

And that is so true, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this rule change is just an example of this government, the Sask Party government, abusing their power, showing the opposition that they are boss. It's a schoolyard bully mentality. Now to use majority power over minority in this legislature is not in the interests of the people of Saskatchewan, of the people in our society, and it's not at all in the interests of fairness. And I want to quote here from Stanley Knowles. And this is so, so important:

. . . a full and unquestioned recognition of the rights and functions of the opposition to the government . . . [is required to] protect the rights of minorities; only in this way can you make sure that the force of public opinion . . . [is] brought to bear on the legislative process . . .

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the question remains, why the panic? This is not about the legislation; it's about abuse of power. This is what this is all about because they know the legislation will in some form move forward. We're at the beginning of this term, this session. They know they have time. What's this all about? And I really do have some serious, serious questions about this.

Well, Mr. Speaker, in review I want to talk about how this really is incompetence in so many forms. And I just want to highlight again how I am concerned. As I go about talking to different groups and hear concerns, especially in the area of social services, people are very very concerned about what that means.

There is a big chill out there. And if there was ever a message to be sent to people in Saskatchewan, it's what's happening today and this week by these men and women over here who are saying, listen, we're the boss. We're simply the boss. And if you want to get in line and get your stuff, then get in line. Otherwise we don't want to hear from you. And so they're setting the tone. And this is really, really a concern. It's abuse, and it's about being a bully.

So they've been caught in so many incompetent circumstances, so what do they do? They rush in to change some rules. But they have forgotten about why they're here. It's all about democracy. It's about something we cherish so deeply here in Saskatchewan. And this is a shame, Mr. Speaker.

There's many people here are new. This is the first time they've gone through a budgetary process. What a lesson to learn in your first term. What a lesson to learn. I've been here six years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I have not seen this kind of bullying in this House. I've seen negotiating. I've seen people getting together. But I've never seen anything, anything at all like this.

I want to end on a quote by Stanley Knowles again. It's so important. He goes and he says: If then free discussion in parliament is to mean anything, if it is to be real, certain measures of strength must be accorded to the opposition. It must be recognized that the opposition's right, indeed it is its duty, whenever it feels strongly about any matter of public policy, whether it be something the government is proposing or concern over something the government is failing to propose . . . [we should] criticize and attack government for all it is worth.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am in favour of the amendments. I think the amendments are very, very good and well thought out. And I will definitely be speaking and voting tonight with honour and a sense of commitment to the democratic process against this ill-founded motion. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!