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**DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS**

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**Budget Debate**

**The Speaker:** — I recognize the member from Saskatoon Centre.

**Mr. Forbes:** — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you. It's indeed a pleasure to enter into this budget debate. It's time, time to have some good, level-headed debate about this very important decision that we're going to make in the next few days and weeks ahead. And this decision, of course, will have long-lasting effects. And as the member opposite said, we will remember this budget, I'm sure.

Before we start though, I just want to say that I want to reflect on an event that many of us were at a few weeks ago in Saskatoon — the Saskatchewan Elocution and Debate Association. Many of us were there and were watching the kids and high school kids debate. And we were talking and we were joking amongst ourselves how we were going to learn some lessons from these debaters, these high school debaters, some of them as young as grade 5. And one of the main themes or one of the main practices you have is what you call ad hominem. You attack the argument and not the person. You rely on the logic and not the emotion to get you through that. And of course over this past few days we've seen a lot of emotion. People get wrapped up, but they kind of ignore the logic.

And I think that's what some of the problems with this, this debate on this really important budget misses the point. Of course there's some good points that . . . I have to say I appreciate the emphasis on infrastructure. Infrastructure's clearly very, very important and they've made their choices. Some of the choices we would have to disagree with very much and one that I have to talk about and it's a headline from *The StarPhoenix*, March 20. It talks about no funds and I quote:

*No funds for St. Mary replacement*

Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools is bitterly disappointed Wednesday's budget included no replacement money for a crammed and crumbling inner-city school. At the heart of a city-driven plan to revitalize the neighbourhood of Pleasant Hill sits St. Mary Community School, which was so crowded earlier this year classes were held in the teachers' lounge and the library doubled as a homeroom. A failing boiler frequently leaves the gymnasium freezing.

"Disappointed probably really underscores our feeling towards the St. Mary project," Don Lloyd, the school division's superintendent of administrative services, said Wednesday. "(It's a) very valuable project for that community."

And I agree. So there are some points like that that were missed and I have to say it was a real disappointment.

I also have to say, you know, it's interesting the members opposite say they don't want to look in the rear-view mirror. They don't want to talk, and the next line they talk about is 16 years. But yet at the same time I've seen the press release that talks about the 15th balanced budget. Kind of interesting how you put those together. It's kind of a, kind of a odd thing.

And I had to say the member from Silver Springs, one the favourite things I heard from him last year was we're sitting on a mountain of money and this year they are sitting on that mountain of money — \$1.3 billion — and what have they chosen to do with it? I have some very, very grave concerns about. But we'll go to some of those quotes. And I do want to say and reiterate that our side has identified four major concerns.

The first of course is the property tax or what we might call the pizza rebate, the \$27 that we might see. But with the, what the city officials from many cities are saying, they're very worried that this will be eaten up. For example here's another headline from *The StarPhoenix* again on March 20. This headline is:

*Budget shortchanges city: Atchison*

Gov't revenue-sharing . . . coming to city won't be enough to stave off tax increase . . . Now what does he say. Here's the quote:

"The province was saying that they were going to put in seven per cent (more) in revenue sharing, and in fact it is seven per cent for the cities — so that's about \$1.2 to \$1.4 million. [That's] What we've been asking for, though, is approximately \$5 million from the province. So we're short about \$4 million at this time," Atchison told reporters at a press conference after the budget was delivered.

"So what that means for taxes this coming year is it's going to be a very, very difficult year for us — because last year we did receive \$5 million, and people have to understand that for every \$1 million, that's one per cent on taxes."

Now it's interesting. That same article goes on to quote Roberta Fehr, a homeless woman who works for . . . This is quote:

Roberta Fehr, a homeless woman who works for a community group helping people coping with extreme poverty, was incredulous to learn Saskatchewan Housing Corp. will receive \$5 million less than last year. The province's newly-created task force on affordable housing is a waste of resources because homelessness has been studied to death, she said.

So this is a problem about the property taxes.

Another one of course is training spots. This is a real weakness and for somebody, a minister who has direct experience in this, we should have expected more.

Our third concern focuses around environment. And I have to say that it's a sad, sad day that we have a Minister of Environment who won't champion environment causes but seemed delighted and happy to have our green initiative fund gutted — gutted, Mr.

Speaker — and diverted to other projects. Other projects that are worthwhile, but when you see green funds going to highways I have to wonder what's going on. And she seems very happy with the paltry amount that's in there.

And today we had a discussion about clean coal and all those energy things. And I think the key word — and this is one word I would ask her to learn — is sustainability because sustainability is the key. They're taking many of our reports — the green strategy, the climate change action plan — very important, but learn about sustainability, sustainability.

And of course, Mr. Speaker, our fourth concern, and this is so important, is about housing. And of course I was really disappointed, I was really disappointed that the day before the budget the Minister of Social Services announces the establishment of a housing affordability task force. Well my shock and disappointment continues, Mr. Speaker.

And we've been talking. Many people have approached me and they'll say, how do you make contact with this group? How do you make contact with this group? Well, Mr. Speaker, I've learned on the website that actually they have a little web page, and you write them. And if they are so inclined, they'll invite you. But I have to tell you I'm very disappointed in the minister for not announcing public meetings and a public consultation. Here she took three months, three months to organize a two-month task force, and so this is really, really disappointing.

And of course we know that Mr. Merriman when he said, you can't sit back and do nothing, and we're going to look and see what those folks actually produce out of this report. It's a very interesting thing. And of course we can see the headlines, and they are shocking. Here we go. "Milroy tenants up in arms." That was the February 16, 2008. A couple facing \$215 rent increase in apartment. What's happening? We get a study, another study. "Student protest out in the cold." Students aren't even included in this group. So what's happening there? And little done to address the housing crisis. It's very, very sad.

But, Mr. Speaker, we were equally shocked not to hear that part of the attention on the task force would be on First Nations or Métis housing, both on- and off-reserve. This is a very important area, and not a word about that. And of course the North. And one area that I think is very, very important is dealing with people living with disabilities and their housing needs. Clearly ignored. Clearly, clearly ignored. Well as I pointed out a few weeks ago, our government in February a year ago announced over \$100 million for renewing our communities. Sixty million of that were going specifically for housing initiatives.

And I said then, and I'll say it today, and I will continue to say it, and I will ask this government to have the same brave, bold, strong leadership for our inner cities in this province — not only for Saskatoon, but for Moose Jaw, for Regina, Prince Albert, all the cities and communities. You know it was interesting when I was phoning around after the

budget was delivered. People were talking about housing even in small communities. When you announce training spots, you have to have places for people to be.

Well, Mr. Speaker, in many ways this Throne Speech was described by one journalist as a bit of job jar. They had a list of things they were going to do. Didn't really make a lot of sense. They're high on the hype. They've got a lot of hype going into it, but really there was no overlying vision that people could understand. Where was this government going? Now you know what, Mr. Speaker? This budget looks like a bit of a Pandora's box. We're opening it up and we're getting a peek inside and we're really starting to understand what is happening with this government.

Did they really take the time to plan out some of these things that they're getting into a little bit of trouble about? For example, the other night we were asking about the highways, how many more kilometres were actually going to be paved this year than last year. The minister was very evasive on that. Wouldn't answer it. Wouldn't answer it. And it turns out, and it can't be denied — and if it is, that'd be great; I'd love to hear it — but it turns out it's something like 28.5 more kilometres, 28.5 more kilometres. That's pretty sad for all the hype that we're getting here.

And of course we're talking . . . And we've had some interesting news today about the modernization strategy of Social Services. Of course this now looks like it's ancient history, a bit of a train wreck. You know, it's a Doppler effect coming down the road. You know something's not very pretty about what's happening here.

And of course the press release today was even more alarming because all the little code words . . . like really, what does it mean? It talks about layoffs not due to this strategy, but what's really, really happening? We see in the budget book — and, Mr. Speaker, I just want to take a minute — we see in the budget book the employment support and income assistance section goes from last year, 310 million down to 298 million. That's a change of over \$12 million. And then in their book over here it talks about a savings of \$1.1 million. Now what's happening with that, Mr. Speaker?

Now I do have to say there's some very good things that are happening, but we need to know more about it, because there may be problems with it. For example, the 1.1 million for increased funding for transition houses and sexual assault centres — very well received. And I think the government deserves kudos if they deliver on that in a meaningful way that helps all centres and all people who are in that area of need. Very important. So I will give them credit for that.

I am also looking forward to the 500,000 one-time funding to host a summit of CBO [community-based organization] organizations. I am looking forward to that because I think it is very important to involve people from the CBO sector in their planning. I think it is good, and I think that a lot of credit deserves to go to government for that. But I do have some questions about that. Will those be public meetings? When we did the green strategy, I know the critic came to every meeting at the green strategy. Will the same thing be happening with the CBO summit? Or will we or others who might have a

different point of view be frozen out? So I will be looking for how those CBO summits will be handled. I think it's a very important initiative, and if we can get people to work, that's very, very important.

Again, Mr. Speaker, getting back to this strategy, modernization strategy, I do have some deep, deep concerns because of where the government was going. And I don't know what kind of consultations happened in January, February, and December after the disabilities council was disbanded in the dark of night. But the minister assured us all that she was talking to different groups, and that's good.

But clearly, clearly anybody who's been involved in this area of Social Services knows that, over the course of the past few years, one of the most important areas are dealing with people who are living with disabilities and disability income supports.

The information is out there. Over 70, 75 per cent of the people on a static caseload are people with disabilities. So if the minister wants to make a big impact, a big impact in that area, consult with those folks on disabilities, those people living with disabilities, so they can have supports that have dignity and respect and can help those folks get to work. There are many problems with Social Services that are always trying to be refined and improved.

But I would say and I would recommend to this government, take a look because, if you talk to a lot of groups across Saskatchewan, the issue around disabilities is very, very, very important. And so to ignore that and say, we just want to refine, we want to polish up the Social Services, that area of employment support and income assistance . . .

You know, if you want to make something really happen for this province in a big way in the next four years, take a look at how you can support people living with disabilities — huge, huge stuff there.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think that I do have some concerns about what's going to be happening in this area of Social Services. The minister has not established her credibility very well. She's had some issues since January, starting with the disabilities council, then going to the housing task force the day before the budget came out, the modernization strategy. That's a bit of . . . I don't know how else you describe it. But the government got caught, got caught trying to lay off people, and now they're backtracking.

And when you read this press release — and I was trying to make sense of it — I got to tell you, they should get somebody over there who can write plain English. Plain English would go a long way because this is . . . What is this? Do you want to hear it? The minister's over there, I mean, and it's all . . . Well they can get it on their website. It just came out before, before House.

But, Mr. Speaker, there are concerns, huge concerns about this. But I do want to say, another headline here, “Little in budget for poor, groups complain.” This is again the day after, and this is what Peter Gilmer said in that. The headline is, “Little in budget for poor, groups complain.” It starts, I quote:

“I don’t think . . . this budget deals seriously with the question of poverty in Saskatchewan and it certainly, in and of itself, is not dealing with the crisis of affordable house quality and affordable housing . . .” said Peter Gilmer with the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry. “What we’re really not seeing in this budget, given a very good financial position for this province, is a significant commitment to a social agenda.”

And then it goes on: “It didn’t go far enough to include the things that would make sure everyone can participate, especially those with low incomes who cannot afford the skyrocketing prices of housing in Saskatchewan,” he said. Both Forbes and Gilmer welcomed the announcement that \$5 million will be set aside for food banks and community-based organizations (CBOs) for life skills, development and job-skills training for under-skilled individuals.

So we can recognize the good stuff, but there are some serious issues. Even the Minister of Finance, even the Minister of Finance recognized the day after that there were some questions. And I’ll read from the *canada.com* network. And the headline is “Saskatchewan housing situation needs more than the budget provides: Gantefoer.” And this is in the *Leader-Post*, Wednesday March 19, 2008. It goes:

Regina — After announcing a budget that focuses largely on areas such as highways, health care and education, Finance Minister Rod Gantefoer admitted the budget didn’t go as far as he would have wanted to address some social issues.

“We’ve addressed many of those issues in our platform of commitments and we’re certainly doing that,” he said on Wednesday. “There are some things that are still undone and I recognize that. For example, we need to get a good handle on what needs to be done to improve the housing situation more than is provided for in this budget.”

Well, Mr. Speaker, I can go on, and I can go on, especially about the *Health Disparity by Neighbourhood Income* report that the Minister of Health assured me that he was going to read but seems to be more interested in the infrastructure report. Should have read this report because I tell you the whole issue around Station 20 would be clear as day why they should be putting money into Station 20.

But I see my time is almost up. I just want to end with a quote here from *The StarPhoenix*: “Government’s actions signal trouble ahead,” and clearly it does. And I will quote now: “If, as is generally the case, the Saskatchewan Party uses its first budget to set the tone for its administration, the province has a growing list to worry about.” Mr. Speaker, I couldn’t agree more. Mr. Speaker, I will be voting for the amendment and against the main motion. Thank you.

**Some Hon. Members:** — Hear, hear!