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The Honourable Don Toth, Speaker

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

Planning and Consultation in the Ministry of Social Services

Mr. Forbes: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Social Services has some explaining to do. Last week when it was revealed by media that ministry staff told employees that the budget included a plan that would result in about 200 layoffs, the minister used the old deny-and-deflect strategy. She denied that plan was being put in place and blamed her officials for sharing information with employees. But the public isn't buying it, Mr. Speaker.

To the minister of Social Services: why won't she accept responsibility for her ministry?

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the Minister Responsible for Social Services.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Yes I will, Mr. Speaker. When I first learned of the proposal to modernize the income assistance, I agreed to one year's provision of the plan, but I expressed serious concerns that needed to be addressed with some of the elements of that plan. I also expressed that I was not comfortable with the long-term elements of the plan. I, as the Social Services minister, take responsibility if some of my officials did not understand me.

As such I have taken immediate actions. I have met with the employees in Saskatoon to apologize and to clarify. I have sent email to all of the employees to do the same. I have discussed this matter with my deputy minister, and I will be taking the issue to have a cabinet discussion.

Going forward, I will be having consultations with the front-line workers. I value their opinion. I think they have absolutely important information to add to how we can deliver income assistance that is for the best of our clients.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Forbes: — Well, Mr. Speaker, that just simply isn't good enough. She likes to throw up her hands and say she didn't know and be done with it. I guess the minister's decided it'd be better to admit that she didn't have a clue than to take responsibility. But the facts aren't going to make her little plan so easy, Mr. Speaker. You see, the minister's signed off on her budget which includes a four-year plan. She also sits in cabinet and on Treasury Board. That's three separate and surefire ways that the minister should have known the plan for her ministry. Even the official opposition doesn't believe the minister could be that asleep at the wheel.

To the Minister of Social Services: does she really expect citizens to believe she simply didn't know?

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the Minister Responsible for Social Services.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Mr. Speaker, I acknowledge that I did know about the strategy that was being proposed from my official, and I expressed serious concerns with some of the elements of that strategy, and I'm still concerned about certain elements of that strategy.

Ultimately the priority of this minister and the priority of our entire government is that we need to have the best program possible to secure the future of our clients. Those are the people that are in the most need within our society. So I want to consult with the front-line workers. When I met with the front-line workers in Saskatoon, they treated me with the utmost respect and professionalism, and they deserve the same from their minister.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Forbes: — Well, Mr. Speaker, the members opposite ran on a message of accountable and transparent government. But I guess it was one of their many short-lived commitments.

The minister's knee-jerk reaction to finger point and claim ignorance are not sitting well with Saskatchewan people. The Saskatoon *StarPhoenix* editorial Saturday put it this way, and I quote, "If even after four months on the job the minister was still unable to grasp the ramifications in this case, it casts doubts on her ability to understand how her ministry's other policies impact on the lives of Saskatchewan's most vulnerable citizens."

Mr. Speaker, it is clear people are doubting this minister's ability to do her job. To the minister: why should Saskatchewan people have any confidence in her ability to do her job as a minister?

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the Minister Responsible for Social Services.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Mr. Speaker, I will say once again, as the Minister of Social Services I take responsibility for what my ministry officials did not understand.

The Speaker: — Allow the minister to respond to the question.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. But I will not, I do not think that it is productive to point fingers. It is a matter of doing what is best for our clients.

Mr. Speaker, I take responsibility. I will go forward with consultation. We are not going to put through a plan that I and my colleagues are not comfortable with. That is not going to happen, Mr. Speaker. Our clients must come first and the workers must be considered.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the member from Saskatoon Nutana.

Ms. Atkinson: — So, Mr. Speaker, I have questions for the Premier. Let us review. We have a minister of the Crown that has said very clearly to the public that it's her officials' fault that a proposal went forward to change a system in the Department of Social Services. It's the minister who has to sign her budget documents that go to Treasury Board. She sits on Treasury Board and the cabinet deals with it, and yet she says her officials didn't know.

Well, Mr. Speaker, she knew. She knew. And I ask the Premier, what kind of processes do you have in place where a minister signs off on a document, Treasury Board deals with it, and cabinet deals with it, how can a minister possibly blame her officials for this kind of situation?

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the Premier.

Hon. Mr. Wall: — Well, Mr. Speaker, I think what the process that this side of the House has in government with respect to these matters is pretty clear and markedly different than what we have received, markedly different than what the people of the

province received when that member sat at the Executive Council table, when that member for Riversdale was the premier of the province.

Witness if you will, Mr. Speaker, SPUDCO [Saskatchewan Potato Utility Development Company]. When ministers, when ministers of the Crown, Mr. Speaker, knew that they were not telling the truth with respect to the nature of the relationship, did they take immediate action as the Minister of Social Services has? Had they been frank and accepted responsibility if officials were unclear as to the minister's direction? No, Mr. Speaker. They covered it up for six years. You bet it's different on this side of the House.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the member for Saskatoon Nutana.

Ms. Atkinson: — Well with all due respect, the Premier didn't answer the question, and I guess I have another question to the Premier given that he didn't answer the last one. We have a minister of the Crown that has indicated to all and sundry the health status of a public service. And I would ask the Premier this question. Is it the policy of the Government of Saskatchewan to release private information to every newspaper journalist in the province when it comes to the health status of public servants in this province?

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the Minister for Social Services.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Mr. Speaker, I again will say that I was aware of the program. I had serious concerns about that program. I expressed those concerns to the ministry. Those concerns can be reviewed. We could have consultation. It does not change the financial allocation for the '09 . . .

The Speaker: — There are some members who continue to interfere and not allow the members placing the question or the members responding to actually be heard. I would ask the members to allow the minister to complete her comments.

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My concerns in the '08-09 budget can be addressed without changing the financial allocation in the budget. We are not changing this year's budget, and we can address the concerns that I raised with my ministry.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the member from Saskatoon Nutana.

Ms. Atkinson: — Well you see, Mr. Speaker, here is the difficulty. The difficulty is that each year in the budget they put forward a four-year plan for the financials. That's what they did in this budget. And in the minister's budget that she signed off on, there would have been a four-year summary of what was going to take place. But the minister says, I guess I understood but I didn't make it clear.

Well she signed off on it. It went to Treasury Board. The cabinet dealt with it, and now what she's doing is she's blaming her public service, and in fact what's she's doing is she's also releasing private, confidential information about the health status of public servants.

I ask the Premier, is that the government's policy — whenever a minister gets into trouble they're going to talk about the health status of a public servant in this province?

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the Minister Responsible for Social Services.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And I will say once again, as the Minister for Social Services I take responsibility for the ministry officials prematurely, in an internal communication, communicating a strategy that we are not certain that we're going to go forward with in years 2, 3, and 4. Mr. Speaker, they are aware that I have concerns with the out years of this strategy. We will be looking at those out years in consultation with all of the stakeholders involved. Mr. Speaker, these are projections of future years. They are merely that, and they amount to about 1 million in an over \$600 million budget.