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STATE OF LITERACY

Inquiry

Speech by:

The Honourable Larry W. Campbell

Monday, November 6, 2006

THE SENATE

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STATE OF LITERACY

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Fairbairn, P.C., calling the attention of the Senate to the State of Literacy in Canada, which will give every Senator in this Chamber the opportunity to speak out on an issue in our country that is often forgotten.—(*Honourable Senator Robichaud, P.C.*)

Hon. Larry W. Campbell: Honourable senators, I would like to join with the thousands of other Canadians in expressing my sincere disappointment with the \$17.7 million cut made by this government on September 25 of this year. According to the latest International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, 42 per cent or 9 million adult Canadians have low literacy skills. In British Columbia, 1 million adults have those low skills. This means they struggle with everyday activities such as job applications, medical instructions, election ballots and, perhaps most important, reading with their children.

Low literacy is linked to low income, low employment and poor health. The level of literacy skills in the workforce has direct links with our country's economic welfare. According to Statistics Canada, a rise of 1 per cent in literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5 per cent relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5 per cent rise in GDP per person.

Honourable senators, I would like to know how anyone can look at these facts about literacy in Canada and decide to cut funding. Literacy programming in Canada has always been underfunded and the funds that were available were essential in helping Canada's most vulnerable citizens, such as the First

Nations, new immigrants and people with disabilities. Canada's literacy programs, as I have said before in this house, are run by dedicated staff and a network of thousands of volunteers in every community of every province in every territory. These funding cuts send a discouraging message to this vital group of Canadians.

I first became involved in the literacy cause through the Peter Gzowski Golf Tournament for Literacy. Mr. Gzowski understood how critical Canada's literacy problem was and rallied prominent Canadians from media, politics and business to raise more than \$10 million for the cause. More recently, CanWest leader Dennis Skulsky started Raise-a-Reader, a national fundraiser for children's literacy which has raised more than \$7 million for literacy. In addition, Premier Gordon Campbell — my older brother, just in case you are wondering — is a devote advocate for literacy and first started when he was a teacher, prior to becoming a politician. These initiatives are a testament to how much literacy means to Canadians. These Canadians need to see that their government is also committed to improving our literacy levels. To tackle this enormous and complex problem, we need more funding — not less.

This week, we learned that the federal government has changed the specific areas impacted by these cuts. I welcome this fact: that the government is coming to its senses and is reconsidering the details of the \$17.7 million cut. Only now, literacy programs across the country have no idea how they will be impacted by the cuts. Can we possibly get some idea or some sense for Canadians of what literacy programs and services will be affected by the cuts?

It is rather ironic that this Thursday is Literacy Action Day on the Hill. On this day, literacy representatives from across Canada will be here to discuss literacy. I hope that senators will make themselves available to speak with these representatives and discuss the national disgrace of Canada's literacy levels.