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| Sasketchawan | 26e  | 2e  | Discours sur l’éducation | 2008 | Kenneth Patrick Krawetz | Ministre de l’éducation | Liberal |

**Saskatchewan: Education Speech, second session of the twenty-sixth legislature, 2008.**

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it is indeed a privilege and an honour to enter into the debate on the budget of the Saskatchewan Party, our first budget.

And Mr. Speaker, I want to begin — as I did not enter into the debate on the Throne Speech back in December and this is my first opportunity to rise in debate — I want to acknowledge the constituents and the residents of Canora-Pelly for re-electing me for the fourth time, and I appreciate their support and advice that is provided to me on an ongoing basis.

I also want to thank my staff back in Canora-Pelly — my constituency assistant, Bob Blahay, and my two other assistants who provide part-time work, both Carol Sleeva and Brandi Zawislak — for their outstanding work because without them it is very difficult to make sure that all of the concerns that are raised at the local level are addressed.

So, Mr. Speaker, with those opening comments, I’m very pleased to be able to talk about this outstanding budget because, Mr. Speaker, the reaction by so many has indeed been that. It has been outstanding as we look at the comments made by so many individuals throughout the province.

Mr. Speaker, I’m not going to repeat all of the comments made, but I’m just going to talk about some of the headlines. Mr. Speaker, after our March 19 budget, the headline that was headed . . . article on behalf of the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation said this: STF “welcomes overdue funding for K to 12 education.” Mr. Speaker, the article regarding the rural municipal position was this: “SARM pleased with provincial investments in infrastructure.” Mr. Speaker, the Chamber of Commerce, their headline on their article was this: “Chamber supports strategic investments to promote future growth.”

Mr. Speaker, that was the key to looking forward, to ensuring that this tremendous momentum that we have in the province of Saskatchewan right now, the growth that we’re seeing in so many areas, is going to be sustained into the future.

Mr. Speaker, I think one of the telltale comments was delivered on March 20, the day after the budget, on CJME radio, and I want to enter that article into the record, Mr. Speaker. The heading on that article was, “Budget: new government put our money where their mouth is — growth agenda did a giant step forward.” Mr. Speaker, the comments are by Paul Martin. And they are, and I quote:

Last fall when the province’s two major political parties duked it out in the election, the key theme that emerged was centered on the way the parties would deal with the buoyant economy.

The NDP said it was time to harvest the economy. In effect, it was big enough and that we should take the extra money generated by the economic activity to underwrite an expensive drug plan.

The Saskatchewan Party on the other hand argued a different vision saying that the growth pattern had just begun, and it was time to invest in building a bigger economy not halt its progress. Well the new government got its first chance to put our money where its mouth was in yesterday’s budget.

With the title, Ready for Growth, the Saskatchewan Party directed its attention to infrastructure, the foundation for economic growth as we build a new platform to continue building upon. And the government’s promise in the last election that it will deliver a growth agenda took a giant step forward.

I’m Paul Martin.

End of quote, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, that is very indicative of how people in the province have reacted to the Sask Party’s first budget.

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Mr. Speaker, I want to spend some time talking of course about my responsibility, and that is education. On behalf of so many people in the province of Saskatchewan who have children in schools right across this province, Mr. Speaker . . . There are over 700 schools throughout the province, and there are many parents. There are many children. There are many taxpayers who are very concerned about what happens in education.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my cabinet colleagues, and especially the Minister of Finance, the member for Melfort, for understanding that — at this point, because of what the previous administration has done to education, its lack of support to education for so many years — that there was a need to address infrastructure. Mr. Speaker, there was also a need to address other initiatives within the education budget, and I think we’ve done just a tremendous job. And I want to thank the caucus members and the cabinet for seeing that this was going to be key to the success of the province of Saskatchewan.

Education is the cornerstone. It is the building block for moving this province forward, and this government has recognized this. How has it recognized this, Mr. Speaker? Well I can tell you that the Education budget in its entirety is $1.186 billion, Mr. Speaker. That is an outstanding amount of money.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Speaker — Mr. Deputy Speaker is now sitting in the Chair — Mr. Deputy Speaker, this was an increase of $241.7 million, which is 25.6 per cent increase. It increased a quarter of its total amount, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That shows the people of this province, that shows, I believe, the members opposite that we are very supportive and that we want to move education forward, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[20:00]

And I’m going to highlight some of the things that have happened in education with this additional $241 million. First of all, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the increase to the foundation operating grant. This is the money that is transferred by way of government grant to all of the school divisions. This additional monies that was provided to school divisions is $34.6 million, which is almost a 6 per cent increase to what was previously received. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this fulfills a commitment within our platform that said over the course of four years, we would increase funding to K to 12 system by 20 per cent. And in our first year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are already at 6 per cent increase.

Mr. Speaker, we have also provided $500,000 in the way of funding to community schools to increase the nutrition program. Mr. Speaker, it was in our platform. It was something that we campaigned on, and we have fulfilled that promise.

Mr. Speaker, there are many other initiatives that I wish to put on the record. I want to talk about the fact that we have increased the intensive supports factor. This is a program that is within the grant structure that is allocated to school divisions to provide support programming for students with learning disabilities and difficulties and disadvantages. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we increased this by $3 million, a very significant amount.

Mr. Speaker, this has now raised the total of monies provided to school divisions in the way of intensive supports to $67.4 million. This will allow school divisions to ensure that the programs that are needed to address those learning difficulties and those learning disabilities will in fact be achieved.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have also increased by $2 million the amount of money that is provided for pre-kindergarten programs. And what this will mean, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that we will now add an additional 38 programs. Mr. Speaker, for each . . . Mr. Deputy Speaker, I’m sorry, this pre-kindergarten program is designed to provide assistance to school divisions for vulnerable three- and four-year-olds. And this will now increase the total number of programs from 155 programs to 193 programs that will meet the needs of over 3,000 students, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Speaker, I listened to the member from Athabasca talk about that this was something so close to the NDP. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this program was not even in existence when the NDP were talking about it. This is now going to reach proportions that will address the needs. This will in fact put in place a program that will be very well accepted across this province.

Mr. Speaker, one of the other things we have done is that we have added $33.8 million for child care facilities. This is an increase of $3.4 million. What will this additional money provide, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Well I can tell you that it will add 500 additional child care spaces. Mr. Speaker, this brings that total to 10,350 spaces. Mr. Speaker, that is a commitment. That is a commitment of the Saskatchewan Party government, and it shows by the fact that we have put our money where our mouth is, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the other things that we have provided is $7.5 million in funding to the province’s early childhood development and KidsFirst strategy. Mr. Speaker, we’ve recognized, and many educators across the province, many parents, many school boards have recognized that the time to deal with ensuring that our young children have the ability to succeed at what they do is to address those problems early, to address them at the three-year-old stage, four-year-old stage.

And in fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have programs in schools across this province, in community schools, where there are 18-month-old children that are now coming in because they have been identified that they need some assistance. Mr. Speaker, we’re providing the funds to those school divisions so that those programs can be supported and can be put in place, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

But you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the time that I want to spend this evening and as limited as it is, I want to spend it talking about capital projects, the development across the province in dealing with so many of the needs. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think what we need to first have people understand is the infrastructure deficit that is currently within

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the province.

I want to put this on the record, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that right now before the facilities branch of the ministry of learning in the major capital request list, there are 107 applications. The initial costs — which are, no question they are low, Mr. Deputy Speaker, at this time because inflationary costs have increased dramatically as we move month to month — those projects were identified as requiring $555 million. That’s what the initial major requests are. In fact the school boards association is indicating that the backlog of infrastructure issues might need as much as $1.1 billion to address those needs, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, it’s very easy to see why we have that kind of an infrastructure need. We have to look at the times when schools were in fact constructed in this province. Mr. Deputy Speaker, from 1969 and older, those are the categories — we categorize schools as being pre-1950, 1950 to ’59, of that decade, and ’60 to ’69, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that total is 68 per cent of all of the schools in the province of Saskatchewan are older than 1969. Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that’s already 39 years ago and older. So we know that there is a decaying infrastructure. We know that there is a need.

And, you know, I listened to the member from Athabasca again talk about what they had accomplished and what they had done. And I want to put on the record that this is the accomplishment of the NDP for the past five years. The NDP, through the government funding of capital, invested $169.2 million for K to 12 schools. Five years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they invested a total of $169 million.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I indicated and as the Minister of Finance indicated, we have put forward a very aggressive capital plan. We have put forward a capital plan this year’s budget that is $117 million.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what we also added just a few weeks ago, because yesterday was still the last day of the previous budget and there were some additional revenues from oil and gas, we added $13.1 million to last year’s capital.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in this short time since the Saskatchewan Party has been in government we have added $130 million to capital in the province of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are going to be many happy communities. There are going to be communities right across this province that are going to look forward to some new projects. But you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do also want to indicate for the record the kinds of things that we as a new government inherited from the former ministry. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the projects that were announced in 2003 by that former government — and interestingly enough, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it was an election year when those projects were announced — there was still an outstanding amount of commitment of $27 million for the schools that were announced in Saskatoon.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have now been able to complete the final amounts of money needed to finish Tommy Douglas school, to finish Bethlehem School, and to finish the francophone school within the province, within the city of Saskatoon. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we’ve also been able to finish the funding for the project that was identified also in 2003 for Nutana and for E.D. Feehan, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that $27 million will go towards projects that were already announced in 2003.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is 2008. So for the member for Athabasca to suddenly suggest that we were copying the NDP plans is ridiculous. It is totally ridiculous to listen to him make those kinds of comments. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the other thing that we have been able to do is to make announcements about, of course, new projects. And that’s the part that I’m really excited about, to be able to announce that communities who have been waiting a long time for capital projects. These projects, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have been submitted as projects by school boards. School boards submit forms that are called B-1’s. Some of these forms have been in the ministry in 2004, 2005, 2006.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we’re finally going to get the opportunity to deal with Scott Collegiate. Mr. Deputy Speaker, Scott Collegiate here in Regina is a project that will encompass a lot of partners. It will provide the north central region of Regina with an outstanding complex that will be able to address the needs. It will address not only education needs, it will address health needs. It will commit a facility in short order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because we’re committing the entire amount necessary in this year. We’re not spreading any of these projects out over a number of years as the former NDP government did. We’re putting the money now into place.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the other projects that has been announced of course is in Oxbow. Oxbow is a community in the South East Cornerstone School Division, where they have been waiting for a project for a long time.

And in fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are two other communities that are very close to Oxbow whose schools have closed. They were small schools in the communities of Alida and in Alameda. Those schools have closed because they were under the impression that there was going to be a new school in Oxbow quickly.

Well under that government, Mr. Deputy Speaker, under the former NDP, I dare say those people in Oxbow would have been waiting a long time. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we’re going to address that need and there’s going to be a new school constructed in Oxbow that in fact will result in five schools being put together in one kindergarten to grade 12 complex. That is going to be significant for that community, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the same thing is going to happen in Porcupine Plain.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Porcupine Plain is in need of renovations to its K to 12 school to ensure that the programs and the environment that students are learning in is upgraded.

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And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are committing to that project.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are also committing . . . And I know the two members from Prince Albert, one on this side of the House and the other member on that side of the House, will be happy to know that the project for St. Anne School in Prince Albert is going to be completed in short order because we are providing the funding for that project in this fiscal year, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also want to indicate that the Churchill High School in La Ronge is going to be constructed as well. Significant dollars. This project will probably be in the 14 to $15 million range, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that amount of money is going to be allocated to La Ronge.

And I also heard the member from Athabasca talk about nothing being provided to the First Nations and Métis. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this school is wanted by that community, is wanted by those individuals, and it will address the needs of the First Nations and Métis communities.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

[20:15]

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Deputy Speaker, we’re also announcing a project in Duck Lake. The Stobart Community School in Duck Lake in fact has been waiting to have its project announced, and we’re going to do exactly that. Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are projects in Maple Creek Composite High School. There’s a project at Balcarres School. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the first project of an expansion in Humboldt, the Humboldt Collegiate, is also going to be done this year, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, these are significant projects. These are projects that are costing in the neighbourhood of $100 million because that’s what needs to be done. We need to get ready for growth. We need to be ready to ensure that the future of our children, that the future of Saskatchewan, that the potential for Saskatchewan is in fact realized.

One of the other things, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we’re announcing is that in the city of Saskatoon — because there is significant growth in Saskatoon, Saskatoon’s population, Saskatoon’s expansion is significant — and we have announced that the monies that are needed to do some land acquisition in the Willow Grove area is in fact being announced this year. And we are going to spend $1.7 million of this year’s budget to ensure that that land is acquired, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That’s what this government will do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we’re also providing a number of initiatives that are referred to as block initiatives. Block initiatives are those in some of the other schools that aren’t on the large capital scene, and they are projects that are lower than $500,000. We’re also going to be allocating $12 million to address those projects that are under 500,000. Mr. Speaker, simple math tells you that’s going to be 24 schools at least that will get some funding to be able to address, whether it be a roof repair, a window replacement, or repairs within the structure itself to floors. These are things that this government sees as a priority, and we’re putting our funds there, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have had some discussions in this Assembly about the education property tax rebate. The members opposite have said, well it’s such a small amount. It’s really insignificant. Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the amount of money that we are putting in place to ensure that there is a rebate to agriculture, residential, and commercial lands is $156.6 million, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That’s significant dollars, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I want to indicate for people in the province exactly where those rebates will be allocated.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as known by all of the members on this side of the House, of course agricultural is the main component and of course the largest land group owners in the province. They are agricultural people. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, our commitment to increase the percentage of rebate to property taxpayers of agriculture land will result in $91.8 million worth of rebate to agricultural producers, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Speaker, our commitment to increase the percentage of rebate from 10 per cent to 12 per cent will ensure that residential owners will receive $43.5 million worth of rebates. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is going to be on average $133 per person. The members opposite have been standing in this House and saying, oh it’s just a $20 pizza for this year. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it’s $133 on average for residential homeowners.

And finally, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the commercial-industrial rebate will be $21.2 million which, Mr. Deputy Speaker, translates into $156 million. I dare say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is a significant amount, and when people in the province of Saskatchewan who listened to the now Leader of the Opposition opposite talk about . . . I believe it was four years ago when he said that the current program is “. . . the status quo is not on.” It’s not on any more. We can’t have that.

What did they do, Mr. Deputy Speaker? They didn’t put in place a plan that was going to be achievable, and we’ve said right from the get-go, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the rebate program is a short-term program. And we’ve put significant dollars into the rebate program. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have already started our work to ensure that there is a permanent relief put in place for property tax owners.

And my colleague, the member from Rosetown, is going to be working on that project as the Legislative Secretary in charge of ensuring that the property tax question is dealt with.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Deputy Speaker, a couple other things that I want to talk about today is the amount of money that the province has put into the budget, the education budget, to ensure that the pensions that are owed to superannuated teachers are in fact going to be met. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it’s not a secret — even though the members opposite, some of

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them don’t want to admit it — there is an unfunded pension liability. That unfunded pension liability is significant. And as we move through the next number of years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, up to about 2018, 2019, we will continue to see an increase in the amount of money that is needed to address the payments made on behalf of pension earners.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that’s not a new problem. I can’t blame the NDP entirely for that one because that started back in the . . . even though I’d like to. But you know, that one started away back.

But you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for 16 years they, the NDP, recognized that there was an unfunded pension liability. And I look at what Alberta has done, and I look at what Manitoba has done in terms of putting some monies into the plan in addition to meeting the obligations on an annual basis. And they have addressed that unfunded liability to a degree.

And in fact in the province of Manitoba it looks like the plan is about 80 per cent funded. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Saskatchewan by the year 2026 we will begin to see a decline, but not till then. We then, from now to then, we must continue to add monies to the pension fund to ensure that we are fulfilling the legal obligation of this government to ensure that the pension obligations are met.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is why there is a significant increase to the pension plan expenses for the Ministry of Education, as you will see in the Estimates book. Because each year now . . . Because the plan closed in 1979 — and based on a 35-year career — probably the year 2014 as I indicated, maybe up to about 2017, that’s where we’re going to see the largest number of teachers retire. And there will need to be as much as, the actuarial report is indicating, that we will have to have a line item expenditure in the tune of 250 to $300 million as an expenditure.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we better have growth in this province. We better have growth in this province because if we don’t have growth, it will be difficult to meet that kind of obligation as we move forward into that year.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to end with a couple of comments about the liabilities of the province of Saskatchewan. And I listened, I listened in the last couple of days to the member from Saskatoon Nutana talk about the role that the NDP played from 1991 to 2007. And she talked about liabilities and debt and the like.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to put on the record that from the auditor’s report, the 2007 report volume 2, that in 1991, as my colleague from Melville-Saltcoats indicated, the total amount of liability — that is government debt, GRF [General Revenue Fund] debt, Crown debt, pension liabilities, and other liabilities that the government had in 1991 — that total was $17.6 billion. Significant amount.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let’s move forward in time. Let’s take us to 2007, March 31, 2007. The combined amount of debt and pension liability and other liabilities is 21.6 billion. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that’s an increase. That’s an increase of $4 billion. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for that group over there to say how they have made such significant improvement to the economy of the province while they were in power is just not accurate, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Krawetz: — It’s not accurate. We have almost a $22 billion liability in this province. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the pension liability for teachers is listed at $4.7 billion. It’s something that we’re going to have to pay. You can’t just forget about it and say, oh that liability is going to go away. We have to pay it. It is going to come from the taxpayers of the province of Saskatchewan. So for those people on the other side to suggest that suddenly this . . . magically the debt, the liabilities, they really don’t mean anything, is just not accurate, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We must ensure that this province grows, that we are able to address these kinds of problems because that government did not put in place contingency plans to ensure that we would deal with these kinds of projects. They didn’t deal with capital in ensuring that schools could be constructed, and now we have a terrible disrepair across the province, and we have to ensure that those are met. They didn’t put in place or didn’t recognize that the pension liability in a few short years — when we’re still government — will be a fact that we’re going to have ensure that there’s $300 million for that line item, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They didn’t do that.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am so happy to be part of this government. A government that is looking forward, that wants to ensure that we have a province that is the envy of every other province in Canada. That in fact we will be the place to move to, not move away from. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can tell you that I will be supporting the budget presented by this new government.