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MOTION CONCERNING THE CLOSURE OF PROGRAMS AT LAURENTIAN UNIVERSITY—DEBATE CONTINUED

Speech by:
The Honourable Patricia Bovey

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MOTION CONCERNING THE CLOSURE OF PROGRAMS AT LAURENTIAN UNIVERSITY—DEBATE CONTINUED

Hon. Patricia Bovey: Honourable senators, I rise from Winnipeg, located in Treaty 1 territory, the traditional lands of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dene and Dakota, and the birthplace of the Métis Nation and the heart of the Métis Nation homeland. I rise to speak briefly to my concerns around and for the situation regarding Laurentian University. I support Senator Forest-Niesing's motion.

[*Translation*]

The financial concerns are real, and the spinoffs are significant. The cancellation of Laurentian University's agreement with federated colleges will affect many programs, most of them Indigenous and francophone.

[*English*]

I am not going to get into the details of what propelled the specific recent decisions to manage the financial realities; I'm too far removed. But I do worry about the people impacted directly by the situation: the many faculty and staff job losses, the loss of their pensions and lack of severance pay, I understand. I am concerned, too, about any potential negative effects on ongoing research and scientific experiments, some being long-term partnership agreements with other Canadian and international universities.

There is the impact on students, especially those nearing graduation after enduring a long and complicated year due to the pandemic. While I am pleased other universities have come forward to enable those nearing the completion of their studies to take their outstanding courses through their schools, I can only imagine the tension and anxiety the students must have been feeling.

I believe Canada's universities are well run and well governed. As the former chair of two of Canada's universities and adjunct professor at two others, I know the complexity and integration of funding, the rules and regulations that universities must abide by in all their activities and the multiple joint projects they undertake.

I am also aware that universities fall under provincial responsibility. However, not every aspect of our universities is provincial. The federal government has a clear involvement in our institutions of higher learning. Our universities are bicameral organizations with their boards and senates, each having distinct, yet related, responsibilities.

My point of speaking today is to ensure that we are all aware of at least some of those federal interconnections with our universities. They include immigration permits and visas for foreign students and faculty. Indeed, COVID has seriously negatively affected the enrolment of international students in all our universities, causing a definite loss of international student revenues. It is clear, for instance, that the Saudi Arabian decision to prohibit their students from studying in Canada had a huge impact on Laurentian's fate. I believe that the number of lost enrolments alone was 135 students.

Second, the federal government contributes significant and important research funds to our universities. As I have said, many of those have international implications. Their results are critically important to Canadian society as a whole, whether those researchers are working on COVID, autonomous vehicles or all sorts of substantive issues and societal needs.

Third, the federal government contributes to student aid.

Fourth, the federal government contributes to capital projects, often on a matching basis.

Further, I can add that the funding of francophone programs is aided by the federal government. As we in this chamber discuss the paper by Minister Joly on official languages, I think we need to underline that francophone education across this country is essential. I fear the cuts to francophone programs at Laurentian will lessen that training when it is particularly needed, and I hope this will not be the case anywhere else. I trust it can be reversed.

Reconciliation is an important national goal, too. We have talked about it a great deal. It's particularly important now, especially in recent days following the horror of the discovery of the 215 bodies of First Nations children at the former Kamloops residential school and the 751 bodies of children and adults found last week in Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan.

Indigenous programs in our universities have federal support, and it is our responsibility to ensure that continues and that the programs are effective and timely. As Senator Sinclair has said many times, education got us into this mess; education will get us out of it. We must ensure those education doors are open at every level of learning. Cutting opportunities does not help. Further, Indigenous histories are critically important to all students.

Colleagues, our time is limited, as we're about to rise and we have had much on our plate, so I won't go on. Suffice it to say, I believe we must continue to monitor the situation at Laurentian University and the implications across the country at other universities and colleges, and in societal attitudes to higher education.

The federal government has a particular and important role to play in this situation and in all universities. While this situation is being spoken of by some as being an anomaly, I trust it will not become a precedent for all academic programs with small registrations. Many of those are absolutely critical to Canada as a whole. We have seen a number of important small programs die in recent years, and I hope the Laurentian University realities do not spell more.

As society is undergoing a paradigm shift in many aspects, we must ensure our universities are constructively part of those shifts. Universities are microcosms of their communities and regions, contributing significantly to the local economy and providing substantial leadership and expertise in all areas of regional development and citizens' lives. They train our future leaders and workers, so I support this motion. Thank you.
