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COVID-19 RESPONSE MEASURES BILL

SECOND READING

Speech by:

The Honourable Patricia Bovey

Thursday, October 1, 2020

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Hon. Patricia Bovey: Honourable senators, I also rise today to speak to Bill C-4. These recovery benefits are of real importance for all Canadians but, you won't be surprised to hear me say, especially for those in the arts, those employed by organizations and those who are self-employed.

[*Translation*]

The business and arts communities welcomed the wage subsidy extension announced in the throne speech because it is crucially important to them.

The Canada Recovery Benefit replaces certain aspects of the CERB, which gave those who weren't eligible for EI access to ongoing support. It is especially essential to those who work in the creative sector and for people with disabilities. The opportunity to collect benefits for an additional 26 weeks is just as much a lifesaver for individual artists as the extended wage subsidy is for organizations. I cannot overemphasize how essential these provisions are.

I have already talked to this chamber about the important and integral role the arts play in all aspects of society. I will not reiterate that today except to say that, if our arts and artists go down, society will be worse off as a result.

[*English*]

It will come as no surprise to any of you that much of my work since the March 2020 lockdown has been and continues to be with and for Canada's art and culture sector, individual artists and art organizations. Indeed, just this week I have had meetings with arts leaders regarding the bill and the Throne Speech. The devastation COVID-19 has wreaked on the arts sector has been horrific and I fear this sector will be one of the last to recover and parts of it may not recover at all.

Canadian creators and organizations need the help of this legislation. For the past six months, our theatres, concert venues, museums and festivals of all disciplines were all naturally forced to close.

Every Canadian has felt the fear of this pandemic, and I want to extend my sincere condolences to all those in this chamber and across Canada who have lost loved ones and friends. My concern is also for those who have suffered and are currently suffering from this disease. There is no question COVID-19 has substantially affected our families, our daily lives and our work. But we hope those impacts are temporary.

But when will you feel comfortable returning to your seat in the theatre or concert hall? How will performing arts survive without ticket sales or corporate support which is falling across the not-for-profit sphere? How will museums and galleries fare without tourists and school tours?

The arts are a truly vulnerable part of our not-for-profit sector. Many individuals are self-employed, some are or have been on various sorts of short- and long-term contracts and others in staff positions, though often paid well below comparable levels in other fields.

Organizations live year-to-year, and some only project-to-project. Those with endowment funds are seeing their earnings dissipate with the current markets and there are restrictions on the monies they're allowed to use.

I have talked with and heard from and been in touch with more than a hundred artists as well as directors of arts organizations and leaders of various sector associations and met on several occasions with PACT, the comedy artists, various musician groups and cross-disciplinary representatives within regions across the country. Without exception, all indicated their appreciation for the relief through CERB and the wage subsidy and the flexibility of Canada Council for the Arts and Canadian Heritage coming to the fore with assistance.

But everyone I have spoken with is fearful of the potential layoffs — some say of more than 60% of their staff — that are forthcoming. I am well aware that permanent layoffs already have been made in many aspects of the arts in addition to temporary layoffs. These include designers, fundraisers, artists and behind-the-scenes workers.

[*Translation*]

I want to point out that, over the past few months, artists have kept supporting us with their creativity, initiatives and generosity. Consider the amazing gift artists gave us after the horrific incidents that took place in Nova Scotia this summer. The concerns that have been raised and are being raised again today fall into three categories: short-, medium- and long-term. Everyone is affected.

[*English*]

Immediate crisis management and cash flow in organizations continue to be particularly serious, especially over these last months. It's at this time of year that ticket sales are an essential part of the cash flow for healthy institutions, and they haven't been selling tickets.

Some organizations have not been eligible for Canada Council or Canadian Heritage support and that has hurt small regional historic homes, sites and museums — the lifeblood of us understanding our history.

I have been truly impressed with the creative initiatives which have been implemented already and those planned for the future, though uncertainty of recovery does raise more fears and questions than it does answers. Many organizations have developed new ways of connecting with audiences, and that's encouraging, but one does fear for long-term sustainability. Not until people are able to go back to theatres, concert halls and in larger groups to galleries and museums will the recovery begin.

I hate to tell you this, but for the arts, that is now not being projected by some on the optimistic side until 2022. For most, they're projecting it in 2023, when they hope tourism will recover. I must underline that tourism is a critical ingredient for the arts, just as the arts are for society as a whole. Artists have lost work. Many have lost their career advancement and many are leaving the sector altogether.

Isn't it sad to see dancers at the peak of their career leaving because they can't practise their art form and they don't know that they'll be in shape or have the flexibility to perform when we can get back to the theatres? And let's look at the training for young dancers. That's stopped.

At first, for instance, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School continued teaching virtually with a videographer and a teacher in the studio working at more than the two-metre distance, but when the province of Manitoba had to close buildings, the program could not continue. The concern is if that goes on for too long, we will lose the next generation of dancers because the students in the professional program have to keep at it so they don't lose flexibility and muscle.

So are we on the edge of losing a generation in this art form for which Canada has been held in such high international regard?

I've said many times that the artists are the working poor of Canada, with the largest percentage of those who live below the poverty line. Colleagues, that was in the good times. You can imagine it now in the bad times.

Festivals and craft fairs this summer didn't happen, and I'm really interested in the number of calls I've had from craft artists who — believe it or not — earn their whole year's revenue in the few months of summer fairs, so they have no revenue right now.

So where are we really at? I feel the situation in the recovery of COVID will worsen for the arts before it improves, particularly, as I said, for the performing arts. However, I applaud the artists whose generosity has helped sustain all of us.

How many digital performances, exhibitions, gallery tours and concerts have you listened to or watched? How many of those artists got any money for letting us watch it? Very few, and that disturbs me.

We all know the very real role the arts have played for Canadians during the pandemic, with the Black Lives Matter movement and with the murders in Nova Scotia earlier this summer. Artists singly and together have found a way to reach us, to heal us and to divert our attention and give hope and, while much of that has been unpaid, I hope this bill will help compensate them.

I'm also concerned about mental health. I can't tell you the number of calls I've had at midnight, one o'clock in the morning, two o'clock in the morning from artists who are absolutely destitute and on the edge. I want to thank Senator Kutcher for speaking with me early in the COVID pandemic when I was asking for help, what do I say next?

For organizations being forced to cease their programming, I can tell you that for some of them that was half their 2019-20 season and now they're losing half of this season. They've had to return ticket sales when they've had no cash flow. Fortunately, 60% of people across the country have agreed to take tax receipts instead of their money back. But they've paid their licensing fees for the programs they couldn't give us, they've built the sets, they've paid the artists and advertising. They don't know how long these closures will last or if they will ever be able to mount their programs. I'm now monitoring the number of organizations, colleagues, that may have to fold despite the inspirational virtual programming across the country.

What are the real questions? One of the big questions is re-engaging audiences. How are we going to do it? Will people even be comfortable to go to larger gatherings and theatres, concert halls, museums and galleries? The question is also being asked about how many arts, heritage and cultural organizations, as I said, will survive and where will they be? And will the larger ones be there to help the smaller ones? I could go on, but I'm going to stop.

Art empowers, art is the ability to change society and art is the ability to question and heal an artist's vision. But to do that, it needs the support of this legislation. Let's let the arts sector assist Canada's post-pandemic recovery by supporting this legislation so that artists can support Canadians and help us have the mental health we need to carry through.

Colleagues, you know my family mantra is we're all better off when we're all better off. With this legislation, we can help Canada be better off. Thank you.