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RELEVANCE OF FULL EMPLOYMENT

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

Speech by:

The Honourable Patricia Bovey

Thursday, November 30, 2017

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INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

Hon. Patricia Bovey: Honourable senators, I rise to add my voice to those who have spoken on employment in Canada.

I thank Senator Bellemare for highlighting this critical societal issue through this inquiry. She challenged us “to engage in the pursuit of full employment . . . individual economic independence, freedom and opportunity.” The situation for many in Canada is unstable at best, and for others a life of underemployment, or employment outside the field for which they are qualified, is an ongoing reality.

Senator Cormier defined 100 per cent employment as “ensuring that there is work for all who are willing to work and look for work” — an admirable and inspiring goal, but one which is likely unattainable. We must face current realities and be ready for the challenging impacts of quickening technological and robotic developments. You know from my previous comments in this chamber that I believe a guaranteed minimum income will positively affect employment situations of Canadians. Until then, we have to deal with many related issues.

[*Translation*]

I would like to address some of the insights that were shared by the Honourable Senator Cormier, particularly those of artists from all disciplines, including the visual arts.

Senator Cormier described the situation of artists as being very precarious, one of feast or famine, both in terms of employment and income. I completely agree with him.

Therefore, I wish to speak about the working conditions of artists and also the situation of indigenous peoples.

[*English*]

We think of the artists in the studio, materials around them, dealers on their doorsteps waiting to sell their work, collectors hankering after the almost-finished piece, and public galleries lining up to be the first to show the new work or to present the career retrospective exhibition. We wish. The artists wish.

In reality, Canada’s artists are the largest segment of working poor who earn less than the poverty line. While many artists have studios, the majority are not the well-appointed studios we see in our mind’s eye, or those shown in magazines of international art stars.

We know from the preliminary results of the 2016 Household Survey that the overall number of Canadians living with a low income has increased to 14.2 per cent. Breakdowns by employment sector are not available, so let me highlight statistics from the 2011 National Household Survey and Labour Force Survey.

Artists represent 0.78 per cent of the labour force, 136,600 people, slightly more than the 133,000 in automotive manufacturing.

Artists are more likely than others to have multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Canadian artists earn 39 per cent less than the overall labour force average.

Sadly, 15 per cent of artists either have no earnings or lose money on their self-employment activities; 27 per cent earn less than \$10,000; and 18 per cent earn between \$10,000 and \$19,999. Thus 60 per cent of artists earn less than \$20,000, compared to 35 per cent in the rest of the workforce.

Yet the number of artists with a BA or higher is nearly double that of the whole workforce —44 per cent versus 25 per cent — and on average they earn 55 per cent less than other workers with the same education level.

Women artists earn 31 per cent less than their male counterparts.

In 2010, the 15,945 visual artists earned on average \$24,672, the median earnings being \$10,358, including their art-making income and that from other employment.

In 2010, the 8,140 dancers earned on average \$17,893.

The 2010 poverty line was measured at \$22,133.

For indigenous workers, the median after-tax income in 2010 was just over \$20,000, compared to non-Aboriginals at \$27,600. For First Nations it was \$17,620; Inuit \$20,400; and Metis \$24,550.

This is not a pretty picture of fairness and equality.

The Status of the Artist Act aimed to deal with a number of issues relating to an artist’s work and employment. The 2010 update, presented by the Canadian Conference of the Arts, discussed a number of prescient issues, including artists’ employment, working and living conditions; their social status, including health and insurance measures to ensure equivalent status to other workers in other areas; and measures related to income, support during periods of unemployment and retirement issues.

The update defined creative artists as authors, visual artists, composers and designers, and interpretive artists as actors, dancers and musicians, noting, “Creative artists are more likely to work on their own to create their art and will often do so without a pre-existing contract. Their works will be sold after they have been created.”

Many artists I know work in virtually uninhabitable garrets or basements, lacking heat in winter or air-conditioning in summer. Some have broken or cracked windows and many have poor light. I have frequently visited those where the aroma of mould abounds. The update highlighted that:

A few artists may receive coverage under provincial workers’ compensation programs when they are working under a contract with an engager or producer. But others may have no protection for a work-related injury, such as a visual artist . . .

Further:

Because of their status as independent contractors, artists are often disadvantaged if an engager, publisher or gallery goes into bankruptcy.

Believe me, that happens. Artists are often left without sales income or the art itself. Many don't know their rights — especially indigenous artists who may not have gone through formal art training where they might have learned about copyright rights.

Situations differ across Canada, with Quebec leading in best practices. Good international precedents include contractual or employment relations, collective bargaining, social security measures, taxation, grants, social benefits, income maintenance and intellectual property and copyright.

Some European countries have adapted social programs to deal with the reality of the work of artists. In France and Belgium some categories of artists are deemed to be employees, and this enables them to obtain relevant benefits.

In 2008, the Conference Board of Canada concluded:

The value of the sector to the Canadian economy was far greater than anyone had previously thought, 7.4 per cent of Canada's total real GDP

And they cautioned:

The health of that culture economy, and therefore the future economic health of Canada, depends on having a large and diverse pool of professional artists at the very heart of the economy.

Women are, or should be, a key part of that economy. I find it unsettling that recent research revealed that in 2017 only 12 of Canada's 66 major performing arts companies, with budgets over \$1 million, have women artistic directors: one woman in our 16 orchestras; one in our seven opera companies; and only seven in Canada's 34 theatre companies. In dance they fare somewhat better, with three women directing our nine dance companies. Why so low given the demonstrated talent among women professionals?

I also wonder why, in recent years, a number of directors of major arts organizations, including museums and galleries, come from outside Canada. I don't doubt their ability, but I do contend that the required talent resides among Canadians. Are we giving our up-and-coming arts leaders sufficient experience in deputy roles? Do we lack the confidence in our training programs? Are we not willing to take risks with our own? To have that large and diverse pool of professional artists at the very heart of the economy, as the Conference Board cited, we must develop and steward our talent.

Regarding working conditions, given the lack of a secure income, I fear even well-known artists are forced to live in the studios where they work. With the threat of contravening permits and building codes, they continually watch out for the authorities who might turf them out. I wonder to where. I have been in studios with non-functioning or no elevators, with stairs as the only means of entrance and egress, sometimes eight or nine flights. Often, the most affordable spaces are in buildings awaiting demolition. A number of eminent artists have told me that,

despite that, rents are increased without improved services. Being forced to move studios is one of the most stressful situations an artist can face, compounded by the very real difficulty of finding affordable spaces. Expensive, physically draining and time consuming, moving interrupts work in progress. Wet paintings or sculptures in their wet-clay phase may well be damaged during a move, and moving often means missing a commission deadline.

We need to find a way for artists' work to be counted as regular employment with relevant benefits.

[*Translation*]

Often, artists barter their works of art for a certain number of meals in a restaurant. They are happy to have a forum in which to display their artistic vision, but they still have no job or income security. The most worrisome conditions are those where visual artists work and cook in the same space and on the same stove. I have written about these dangerous situations many times. Shining a light on artists' living conditions tells us a great deal about their health and security. The report states, and I quote:

[*English*]

Particular concerns affect some artists. For example, visual artists may be exposed to hazardous chemicals or toxic materials. A simple sore throat may be a . . . serious impediment for a voice performer. Dancers have special physical challenges, as may some musicians

Imagine an artist working in encaustic or wax, melting their wax over a burner or stove or in a crock pot, and mixing it with a pigment or colour. They then cook over that same burner or stove. Or a print maker who uses toxic acids and inks in their kitchen, lacking the required ventilation. Imagine a painter working with sprays. Work and supplies are pushed to the side, and food mingles with the gasses and particulates in the air. Need I say more about what is in the air they breathe?

Could they work somewhere else with such a mercurial source of income? I have received many calls over the years, seeking help to find affordable studio space. Safe even shared spaces are rare.

The story of highly acclaimed Canadian sculptor Elza Mayhew has haunted me for decades. She was from Victoria and, as a young mother of two, was widowed in World War II. Throughout her personal tribulations, she persevered with her art and proudly represented Canada at the prestigious Venice Biennale exhibition in 1964. She received many international awards, commissions and tributes, and her large bronze sculptures are in public places across Canada.

After sketching her ideas, she cut her forms from blocks of styrofoam, fashioning her signature curvilinear edges with a curling iron to melt and smooth the surfaces. With no foundry in Canada, she had her works bronzed in the U.S. Photographs and a film show her leaning over the kiln during the cooling to check the work. Then, to achieve her desired patina, she rubbed its surface, never wearing a mask.

The cumulative negative health effects from her materials, the accumulation of styrofoam bits in the air and the noxious fumes from the heating of the styrofoam with her curling iron, or those from the kiln, were devastating. She was eventually diagnosed with styrene poisoning, with effects akin to dementia and Alzheimer's.

Thus, the uncertainty of employment and income is often compounded by dubious working conditions and serious residual health issues.

Today, there are safety checklists and warnings about materials. Yet many artists remain unaware of the inherent dangers of their materials or workplaces. If they are aware, they do not have the means to address them.

Increasing numbers of indigenous artists are producing strong and compelling work too. They also work in less than ideal conditions, many in their kitchens. Indigenous and cultural workers represent 3.3 per cent of the total workforce, including 3,655 visual artists. Recent studies show average earnings of Aboriginal artists are 28 per cent lower than the average for all artists. The 2011 National Household Survey showed an indigenous employment rate of 62.5 per cent, as compared to 75.8 per cent for non-Aboriginal peoples. First Nations stood at 57.1 per cent, Inuit at 58.6 per cent and Metis at 71.2 per cent.

The 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey confirmed that those who completed high school were more likely to be employed. By 2014-15, the Metis employment rate had risen 2 per cent to 73.1 per cent, and First Nations rose 5 per cent to 62.4 per cent. The non-Aboriginal rate increased by 10 per cent to 81.8 per cent.

Honourable colleagues, society has challenges. All of this is troubling. As has been proven many times in Canada and internationally, the arts are the best tools we have for social change. I have said in this chamber before that engagement in the arts improves well-being and health outcomes, contributes to reduction and prevention of crime and has considerable positive outcomes in educational results. We know the significant economic and employment impact of the arts, so let's make sure artists' employment is constant, in safe working conditions, properly remunerated and with appropriate training in all disciplines. As Senator Bellemare said, "Full employment . . . is about enabling people to better their qualifications" and "goes hand in hand in pursuing trade and commerce in a globalized world."

You see my concerns. The irregularity or lack of work for those with solid credentials; training; working conditions and resulting health problems affecting many Canadian artists, acclaimed and —

I'm going to conclude by saying that I do not think sufficient research has been done to quantify the extent of these issues, though we all can cite anecdotal evidence proving inequities. I hope this inquiry will stimulate serious research to quantify the extent of these realities. Then, perhaps, we will be able to seek ways to resolve these serious societal conundrums.
