

Member of Parliament Dennis Bevington speech on Bill C-33 First Nations Education Act in the House of Commons on May 2, 2014.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased that I have the brief opportunity on behalf of my caucus to speak on this bill. That is, of course, because of the closure that the government has brought in on this very important bill. This debate will end today and we will not hear any more about it.

The second reading of bills is to talk about the content of the bill and to come to grips with whether we support it or not.

I am also very pleased to be splitting my time with the member for Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou. Between the two of us, I think we have over 100 years of time in northern communities across this vast land. My colleague's knowledge and understanding of that should be of great interest to everyone in the House.

I want to speak a bit about my experience. I grew up in the north. My first school, at grade 1, was the Fort Smith Federal Day School, run by the Government of Canada. It had two residential schools attached to it, Breynat Hall and Grandin College. I grew up through the system with residential school survivors, and many who were not survivors. Many of my classmates came to untimely ends due to social conditions, and the residential apology that took place was a very emotional moment for me. I recognized that so much had happened to first nations people across the country, and it was very personal to me.

My experience also includes being the chair of a local school society, where over 50% of the students were aboriginal students. I was chair of the board of governors of NWT Aurora College. The college's great dedication is toward putting aboriginal students into career positions, and it is very successful at doing that.

I understand the systems that we have set up in the Northwest Territories to deal with education in small and remote communities.

I will move to the report of the national panel on first nation elementary and secondary education for students on reserve. I want to keep my remarks to funding, because it is an area that in my experience has always been very important to talk about when we talk about schools in remote and isolated communities. The report states:

Statutory funding that is needs-based, predictable, sustainable and used specifically for education purposes. [...]

First Nation education reform must be based on strong, positive education outcomes, not on an average cost per student approach. [...] Given the magnitude of barriers faced by First Nation learners, the level of resources and investment required per student will likely be substantially greater than the average level of expenditures provided in the public school system.

That is clearly the case in the Northwest Territories. We have 8,500 students in our schools in remote and isolated communities, as well as in large communities, like Yellowknife, Fort Smith, Hay River, and Inuvik. There the average expenditure per student is \$22,000 a year. When I was the chair of our local education society, in 1985, the level of funding per student in the schools that I represented was equivalent to what the Conservative government is providing today for the students in first nations schools across the country.

We are talking about schools that require greater levels of funding in order to provide services. There is no question about that. There is no question that when we are dealing with a school in an isolated remote situation, where we have to work very hard to entice teachers to go there to teach, or pay the extraordinarily high costs of servicing schools, all of the costs of providing education to a very small number of students are very high. That is simply the case.

When we look at what is done in Canada, where we have 143,000 first nations children, in 2011-12, Aboriginal Affairs spent about \$1.5 billion total. It sounds like a big number. For 8,500 students in the Northwest Territories, we spent in excess of \$200 million a year.

When we look at what has happened in first nations education, we have to look at the dollars and ask how anyone can provide those services that are required across this country in remote locations, away from cities and from all the other things that allow the cost of providing those services to be reduced, and how that can be expected. We have schools that are chronically underfunded today. When we look at what the Conservatives are offering to put into the schools, starting in 2016 another \$400 million per year on top of that, we see that the total amount provided in 2016 is far below what is really required to deal with those schools.

There are 515 on-reserve schools. Right now, there is a \$200 million budget for repairs, maintenance, and infrastructure for schools and classrooms for 515 schools. No wonder these schools are falling apart. They simply cannot do that work. This has been going on since the Liberals. It has been going on for the last 20 or 30 years. Basically, we have never funded these schools properly. We have left them in a situation where schools are falling apart.

An hon. member: The member from Calgary said it did not matter.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Well that is simply not the case, Mr. Speaker, when we talk about 515 schools and we have to replace a certain amount every 30 years. What does it cost to replace a school these days, especially in isolated, northern, and remote locations? I would refer members to some of the school replacements taking place in the Northwest Territories where the average replacement cost is between \$30 million and \$50 million for schools of 200 people. The average school on-reserve has around 200 students. This is the cost we are talking about.

If they are talking about a 30-year replacement plan, then those schools are going to eat up a heck of a lot more money than what they have in the budget here for operations, for maintenance, and for capital costs. What we have and will continue to have, unless we recognize that this is fundamentally underfunded, is having to add major dollars to it. There were the Liberals with their Kelowna Accord. This bill simply would not put the money where it is needed. We can spend billions of dollars a year updating our fighter fleet, but when it comes to upgrading our children's future we are not willing to put those kinds of dollars on the line.

This subject requires more debate and I know I have two minutes to talk about this very important topic and to talk about what we are actually doing with this bill. It is very difficult. I find it repugnant that the Conservatives have called closure on this subject where there is so much to say. There is so much to talk about that the couple of days of debate that we are taking at second reading is really ridiculous. I am in some ways outraged by it, but it is a pattern of the current government, when the Conservatives put forward in their way with all the lofty-sounding principles that they put forward here, and when we start to dig into this bill and realize that we are simply going to continue the situation that exists today. There is simply not enough effort put into this to make the change. What we need is a watershed of funding for these schools to bring them to a level that they can exist and can provide the services that first nations students require. My colleagues will talk about all the other aspects in the bill, and they would continue to talk about it if they had the chance. We do not have the chance to even get close to all the other subjects within this bill.

I appreciate this brief time here, and I appreciate that my colleague will come with some more statements very shortly, right after me, and I look forward to hearing what he has to say as well.