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39th Parliament

## JOHN YAKABUSKI, M.P.P. - RENFREW-NIPISSING-PEMBROKE

Legislative Debate

March 25, 2009

### Poverty Reduction Act, 2009 Bill 152

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I frankly didn't expect to be called upon this quickly for this debate, but as is the case in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, the motto of the Boy Scouts is, "Be prepared." Regardless of when that call may come, you have to be prepared to rise and engage as is necessary. So I am doing that as is necessary.

So thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to this bill, and I appreciate the legislative staff for getting me a copy of this on short notice. It's much appreciated to have this in hand as we debate this legislation. But I must say, I'm not sure what we are really debating. I don't say that to try to minimize my knowledge of the bill, though it is not as broad and in-depth as that of my colleague Ms. Munro from York Simcoe. I say that because there is not much in this bill. It's a vacuous bill, an empty bill. To use the term of my colleague with which she so aptly describes it, this bill as being a perfect example of what has become the Liberal way in this government, a perfect example of what she terms as "gesture politics," which can be described as "the substitution of symbols and empty promises for policy." That is what we're getting from this government over and over again.

When you look at the bill, in the very first part, the preamble, this is what it says-and I'll just slip on my glasses, because the printing is a little small.

**Hon. James J. Bradley:** Just lengthen your arms.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Some people say they're long enough.

"The government of Ontario is committed,

"(a) to regular consultations with respect to the strategy;

"(b) to measuring the success of the strategy by setting a target at least every five years and assessing indicators of poverty reduction; and

"(c) to reporting annually on the success of the strategy."

Well, if that doesn't speak to the principle of gesture politics, I'm not sure what does. I appreciate my colleague's acknowledgment on that part.

What are they actually doing about poverty by bringing in this bill? The short answer would be: writing a report. They're writing a report. Now, people who have been living in poverty are going to find a report-and no pun intended, Mr. Speaker-a little hard to digest. What they're really looking for is some kind of answer from the government with respect to the situation that they find themselves in. They're not looking for another report. I'm not suggesting that you can solve problems without dialogue and without consultations, but we've been over that ad nauseam for years.

One of the things I'd like to talk about as well, and it's very unfortunate that this government likes to paint themselves as the friend of the underprivileged-

**Mr. John O'Toole:** Of everybody.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Oh, yes, that's true. They would like to paint themselves as the friend of everybody. I thank the member from Durham for pointing out that very important fact. They want to be everybody's friend, because if you're out there, they'll find a way to buy your silence or your support.

They often go on about what they see as the poor record of the previous government. A couple of things I'd like to point out, and I think this is important: The former government, between 1995 and 2000, took a quarter of a million people out of poverty. Between 1995 and 2000, in the province of Ontario, a quarter of a million people were lifted out of poverty because the government gave them what they needed: hope and opportunity.

*Interjections.*

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** Hope and opportunity. They established a Learning, Earning and Parenting program, otherwise known as LEAP. They established breakfast programs, Healthy Babies and early years centres.

We have a record. They have an empty, meaningless, report-writing bill. I think that is an important distinction.

This government talks about helping those people who are the most vulnerable, but what in fact they're doing with the management of the economy that they've embarked on-they've done everything they can do to stifle growth and stifle opportunity because they want you to see them as your guardian and your nursemaid, when in fact what people really want is an opportunity. This government has done everything they can to stifle growth and opportunity in this province by huge tax increases; since they've come into office, we're talking \$2,000 to \$2,500 per family in additional taxes and fees brought in by this government. That's absolutely unacceptable if you are talking about giving people opportunity.

The bill says nothing about what they're going to do to lift people out of poverty, although the previous government had a record of lifting a quarter of a million people out of poverty in a five-year period. This bill is going to do nothing, other than ensure that

there'll be more reports written and more discussions. The bill doesn't even direct us as to what will be done with the reports once they're written. Will they simply be collecting dust somewhere or shuffled from one bureaucrat to another, or is there actually a requirement that action be taken as a result of reports that are written? Nothing in this bill would dictate that or would require that at all.

## **1600**

When we're talking about the poorest people in the province, and even people who slip up, who are a little higher up the ladder, they are the ones who are affected most when the government increases fees and costs of essential services. They are the ones who have been hit the hardest, for example, by the health care tax. They are the ones who have been hit hardest by rising energy costs in this province. They are the ones who have been hit the hardest by the delisting of services through our medical insurance program. They're the ones who get hit the hardest, and these people on the other side always want to talk to you about how they're trying to help those people who are lower than the high-income earners.

Let's talk about a hydro bill. If you look at a hydro bill and you're making \$250,000, you know what? It's not really relevant to you. But if you are making \$30,000 and you've got four kids at home, that hydro bill is really important. And this government, because they want to paint themselves as the green government, is going to ensure that those hydro bills are going to go up exponentially over the next 10 years. Who is going to get hit the most? It's going to be those people who have the least discretionary income, because electricity is not a luxury. I like the way my friend Mr. O'Toole from Durham puts it. He says, "You know what? You can call up the cable company and say, 'Shut 'er down. We're not taking the cable anymore,' but you can't shut down the electricity in your home." It's essential. It's absolutely essential to be able to provide light and security to your family. So this government wants to embark upon a program that will ensure that that essential service gets much more expensive for people here in the province of Ontario, and particularly those who can least afford it.

You have to ask yourself why we're even debating this bill. We're basically debating about setting up the rules for the discussions. Would I be correct in putting it that way, I say to my friend, our critic from York-Simcoe? Basically, we're setting up the ground rules for a discussion.

**Mrs. Julia Munro:** Without any accountability.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** No accountability and no action.

I would like to think that this Legislature has more important things to do than talk about the rules surrounding a discussion. I think we need to do some things that actually impact those people who are suffering in Dalton McGuinty's Ontario, some of those 300,000 people who have lost their jobs and are joining the rolls of poverty in the province of

Ontario. Contrasting our record of taking people and lifting people off poverty because we gave them opportunity and hope, this government is pushing them into poverty because they have no hope and certainly no opportunities under this government, only a Premier who wrings his hands and says, "This is a blip," or "This is a minor contraction," and "This too shall pass." Well, it's not going to pass unless the government acts to make it pass, and not with bills that speak to talking; we need bills that speak to doing.

I want to talk about the government's proposal or plan, the semi-leaked plan, among other leaks in this budget-

**Mrs. Julia Munro:** It's a sieve.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** It's a sieve; of course it's a sieve. We know these leaks are by design. We certainly understand that. It's all part of this strategy, this gesture politics. They are trying to ensure that people in their stable remain in their stable, and those who are not in their stable enter and stay in the stable. You know, "Come into my parlour," said the spider to the fly. That's what they do to every special-interest group in this province; they're finding a way to try to attract them to the Liberal fold by having some kind of piece of legislation that they can sell to that particular group. It really is politics at its most cynical.

Anyway, on the plan or the suggestion-excuse me; I swallowed a piece of ice there. Almost choked. Don't everybody clap, because I just said "almost." The plan to possibly harmonize the sales tax at a time when Ontario's unemployment rate is leading the country and economists expect that it could go over 10% in the next year: That's scary. So at a time that these are the prospects for Ontario, this government wants to make sure that if you're selling your home, you're going to have to have an energy audit on it. Even if you're changing tenancies in an apartment building they're going to have to have energy audits on them. It's absolutely crazy.

Here's the list of things that low-income people have to buy. Some of these may seem unimportant, but if you are in a low-income situation, most of your food is prepared at home. Some of these things that are going to be taxed under this plan-and if you do your own baking and make your own bread, baking powder and baking soda are going to be taxed. Diapers: going to be taxed. All kinds of uniforms: going to be taxed. So if you are raising a family-personal care items, hygiene products. If you are raising a family of young children, and some of us in this Legislature are-and some of us are grandparents and some of us are past both points of having infants or children in diapers, whether they're children or grandchildren. But if you're in that category, you know how expensive it is to have to pay for those kinds of things. In Dalton McGuinty's Ontario, in what they purport to be a real commitment to reduce poverty, they're going to ensure that more of that limited money is going to be spent on essentials such as those kinds of items.

When I go through this list-and my colleague from Nepean-Carleton, Ms. Macleod, had a question on that today in the Legislature. I could go through this whole list, but the reality is, if I go through the list, there's not enough time on the clock for me to do it, even if I just did them one at a time, but eggs; fish, fresh, frozen, canned, dried, etc.; flour; fruit,

fresh, frozen, dried, etc.; fruit juice and fruit drinks; honey; jams and jellies. Those are just the food products. Clothing: coats, jackets, ski jackets, gloves, jeans, slacks, sneakers and sports shoes. If you've got kids, you've got to put something on their feet. Sweaters, uniforms: Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, hockey, lacrosse.

You really have to ask yourself, and the Premier said in the fall, among some of his other statements-first he was trying to deny that Ontario was in an economic mess, and then he said, "No one would raise taxes during difficult times." If you're a consumer, a low-income person, and the Premier does what he's intimating he may do and the cost of all these goods that were previously not taxed at the provincial level is now taxed, I don't know how you could view that as anything but raising taxes. That would certainly classify as a broken promise.

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I'm not suggesting that the Premier is going to get too worked up about my suggesting he's breaking a promise, because the fact is, the Premier has never gotten too worked up about breaking a promise. He does that quite easily. You know, the first time you break a promise, it's tough. The second time you break a promise, it's a little easier. It's just like every other indiscretion.

**Hon. James J. Bradley:** What should I do with the letter that says you support it?

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** The Minister of Transportation says he wants to read a letter. I can certainly say he has never seen a letter with my name on it.

**Hon. James J. Bradley:** But Conservatives-

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** I'm speaking today, and our party has made it clear that this is not something we support. But I just want to make it very clear to the minister that he is making that up, as so many times he does.

Like any other indiscretion, the more often you do it, the easier it gets. It doesn't make it right; it doesn't make it justifiable. It's just that in your own mind it can become a bit of a habit. So when it comes to breaking promises, unfortunately, the Premier has gotten so good at it that I'm not sure he even recognizes anymore when he breaks a promise. That is regrettable, because the longer he's in office, it's just going to get easier. So we're certainly hopeful that, at the very next opportunity the people of Ontario have, they do not give Dalton McGuinty too much more opportunity to continue to break promises.

I do hope we get some more substantive action, and not more paperwork, on the subject of poverty. It is cynical at best to be putting forward something like this, suggesting that it is going to improve the lot of underprivileged people in this province. Thank you very much.

**Mr. John Yakabuski:** I thank the member for York-Simcoe for her response or comments on my speech. Clearly she agrees with what we have said, and the absence of any comments from members of the government would imply that they must agree with everything I said as well, so I appreciate that and I appreciate the support on this bill. They all recognize, because they're not rising, that just as I said, this bill is just about printing reports. First of all, the bill itself is just a bit of a report. So it is interesting that members of the government are not standing up to defend this bill, because there's nothing there to defend.

What our critic, the member for York-Simcoe, has said in her address and what we're speaking to today, as well as other things, is that this bill really does nothing. It only requires the government to sit down on a regular basis and chat. Well, we can do that in committee. We can have stakeholder groups come in to address us. We can do that by having special events throughout the province, but this only requires—we're having a piece of legislation that just says, "You must sit down and talk."

Now we're requiring the Legislative Assembly of the province of Ontario to pass a bill, which I know will be passed because the government has a vast majority; it will be passed. We're passing a piece of legislation that just requires of us to sit down on a regular basis and talk about poverty. That's not something that needs to be done by law. That's something we should be doing because we're committed to doing something about it.