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

Legislative Debate

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Public Sector Expenses Review Act, 2009, Bill 201

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much.

It's a pleasure to join this debate, and as I was beginning to say earlier, it's always great to follow my friend from Welland. It's interesting: Most people would presume or conclude that we sit on different edges of the political spectrum, but it is kind of uncanny how sometimes—and many times in this House—we could be reading each other's notes from the point of view of how we see some of the problems with what this government is doing. I guess it speaks to the fact that when something is not being done right and a government is not responding properly, even people perhaps as different in some ways as my friend from Welland and I can find the likeness in their views on that particular issue.

I'm not going to drive all the back roads of Renfrew county today, down Opeongo Road or Hopefield Road or any of that. Speaker, I trust you have probably never been through Renfrew county. If you have, I'm sure you have enjoyed it tremendously, and if you haven't, we'd love to have you up there, because you would certainly enjoy it. Quite frankly, I would say it's a nicer ride than the ride from Toronto to Welland, but then I would not pretend to be totally objective on that subject at all.

What the member from Welland was talking about primarily was—again, I can't speak to all of his McGees or McKees; he would stand as an authority on legislative rules, procedures and precedence. That's one of the things he's a tremendous source of, and I would not pretend to be that at all. He is clearly of that ilk and I don't question any of his rulings in those facts. Many times I actually turn to him for some advice on some of the constitutional history of things that have gone on here and in other legislative bodies elsewhere.

The crux of part of his speech was ministerial responsibility. That's what we should be talking about here, not "An Act to provide for review of expenses in the public sector." We should be talking about the responsibility of a minister to his or her ministry. What is happening here is a big game of deflecto. We'll have a chance to elaborate on that a little later based on the events of the summer etc., but this is a big game of deflecto to try to take some of the heat off what is clearly being demonstrated out there in the public forum for the tremendous and terrible disregard for ministerial responsibility on the part of the McGuinty government.

We're going to go through the background a little bit. The premise behind this whole bill is, "Let's get these people off our backs. Let's tell the people out there that we're doing something about scandals, scandals and misspending"-can I use the word "stealing"? Can I use that word, Madam Speaker?

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): No.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I can't; apparently I can't. I withdraw that then. But all of the stuff that has gone on at eHealth and OLG and other ministries that is only now coming to the light of day, they want to use this to try to block and try to put the public off their game on this, and think, "We're actually doing something about it." But what it really is: The Premier is again thumbing his nose at the people. I'll tell you why: the very fact that he decided to put this in the hands of the Minister of Government Services. There are 27 people in that cabinet-27 people. Why did he put it in the hands of the only minister in the history of this province to be found in egregious contravention of the Members' Integrity Act? The only one ever-not one of just a few, like just a few people have been to the moon; this is the only member in the history of this province to be found, and I'll quote the Integrity Commissioner's words here, "egregiously reckless" and in egregious contravention of the Members' Integrity Act.

So why would the Premier choose that minister? Let's go back in history a little bit about why the minister was found to be that, just a little background in the newspaper here from back on June 12, 2005. You'll remember at the time that the minister was accused and admitted to having meetings at his former place of business, Chalmers industries. He asserted in his testimony that he never had anything to do with the business, had nothing to do with it. But when he was running for office he had on his website that he was the CEO of one of the country's best-managed companies and that it was under him that it was one of the best-managed companies. You can't have it both ways.

Anyway, he was found to be having meetings at Chalmers industries and went on to say that he was having those-and, no less, a ministry car taking him to and picking him up from those meetings. "Nothing is prohibited; you should know that," he said in an interview. "We are entitled to get regular reports from our trustees whenever we want." To which a spokesperson, at that time, for the Integrity Commissioner replied, "They are not permitted to have any knowledge of what is going on and the trustee is not to discuss anything with the minister"-spokesman Lynn Morrison said.

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He went on to say that he was having meetings with his wife to discuss their daughter's college education. It was the only time that he could meet with her, he said, because his long hours, combined with his wife's household chores, meant that's the only time he got to chat with her. "I went to see her to talk to her because there is no time to talk at home. I get home late. She is always busy cooking or doing something else at home," he said. I don't know; she must cook at midnight. But that was the kind of story that we were expected to believe, not only in this Legislature but the general public at large. When the

Integrity Commissioner found him guilty of contravention of the Members' Integrity Act, that was an opportunity for this Premier to say, "If a minister of this crown"-

Interjection.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I didn't; he did.

"If a member is going to be in contravention of that act, then he is not going to sit in Dalton McGuinty's cabinet." But no, what did the Premier do? He kept him on with no penalty. Contrast that with Bob Runciman, when he was the Solicitor General and it just happened that he mentioned a young offender's name in the Legislature. He resigned and was put in the penalty box until that issue could be dealt with. It was in the throne speech, but he was held responsible for it. So you have to ask yourself, is the Premier really serious? There were 26 other people who could have handled this portfolio, and he decided to give it to the only minister who has ever been held in contempt by the Integrity Commissioner in the history of this province.

Let's talk a little bit about the history of the summer and why this government doesn't want ministerial responsibility. Dalton McGuinty, the Premier, does not under any circumstance want to bend and do the right thing and fire a minister for wrongdoing. He would rather try to cover it up, hide the facts, obfuscate the whole issue and then pass it on, bring out a bill in this Legislature to try to take the heat off. That's what this bill is about.

Why would the people believe that the Integrity Commissioner should be the one to answer for spending outside of the rules? Why would the people expect that? The minister is the one who should be responsible. They're the ones who should take charge and take responsibility for the misdeeds of those under their authority. If the minister is not going to take charge and take responsibility for it, then this Legislature is no longer the governing body of that part of our provincial operations. We ultimately have to be responsible, and in order for this Legislature to be responsible, we have to have ministerial responsibility. This bill is anything but, does anything but bring this responsibility under the hand of a minister. In fact, it does everything to protect the minister. It does everything to take the responsibility of running your show out of the hands of the minister.

It's the same thing that has happened, for example, with the LHINs. The Minister of Health built these LHINs, multi-million-dollar operations that now act as a shock absorber for the minister. So whenever there's an issue that the minister doesn't want to deal with, he just says, "That's in the hands of the LHIN. I don't have anything to do with that. I don't make those decisions. It's in the hands of the LHIN." Well, we all know who created the LHINs, and we all know who directs the LHINs when it comes right down to it. But they always have that cushion, so to speak, so that when they don't like the news that's coming out, they can hide behind the LHIN. Now they want to hide behind Lynn again, but that's Lynn Morrison, the Integrity Commissioner. So it's from LHIN to Lynn,

but they're still hiding, and that's the problem here: They're still hiding. They don't want to face the issue, which is government accountability and ministerial responsibility.

Let's talk about one of the reasons that we got here. This government had to do something, or-sorry; what it really had to do was the right thing and have the ministers responsible for eHealth and the OLG mess-it should have been both Minister Caplan and Minister Smitherman because their hands were all over it. And the Premier's hands were all over it because he personally intervened and hired Sarah Kramer at eHealth. Then they had to fire her, but they'd rather do that than fire the minister. That's what really should have happened. If that would have happened, we wouldn't be dealing with a very, very complicated process where now the expenditures of 80,000 civil servants are going to be handled by the Integrity Commissioner's little office of nine people. It's not only unworkable, it's impossible. What kind of oversight can you have when you have to deal with that many people? It's just not possible. There are going to be errors and omissions at a grand level because of the fact that you can't do that with that many people.

What did happen at eHealth? It all started with people starting to dig into the fact that we had this eHealth thing going on here that has spent \$700 million or so and hasn't produced electronic health records, which they continue to promise they're going to get. So some digging was done. It was a result of FOIs-freedom-of-information requests-on the part of our party that were continuously being blocked. We had to reapply, change the wording and ask in a different way, and all of that kind of stuff because they tried to do everything they could to prevent us from getting at them.

The government talks about transparency and accountability, and when Dalton McGuinty was elected Premier, in the very first throne speech he waxed on and on about the importance of accountability and transparency and about how much he would assure and guarantee that that would be the watchword of this government. Well, that's all it was.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Just words.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much to the member from Sarnia-Lambton-just words. That's all they were: words. There was no meat on that bone at all. It was just a way to try to, again, paint a lovely Alice in Wonderland picture to the people of the province of Ontario, but we know what we've got is anything but. I think it's the Mad Hatter who may have taken over somewhere along the way and we're paying the price for that.

Sarah Kramer: It starts out that she gets hired just last year, and again, the Premier had his hands on the hiring. Shortly after that, she gets a bonus of \$114,000, after three months on the job. She barely found her way to the executive washroom. She had only delivered one speech-a \$25,000 speech, mind you. We should all have copies of it. For goodness' sake, we should somehow get our money's worth out of that in one way or another. Maybe we could send it around to all the schools in the province and feel like we got something back for the investment. A \$25,000 speech, and she gets a \$114,000 bonus-but in McGuinty's Ontario, it doesn't matter how much you spend on someone as

long as you're prepared to get rid of them if they might cause you a little bit of heat. So out the door she goes with-she got a severance equal to at least her salary of \$380,000, after three months on the job. Unbelievable.

Then it was all about untendered contracts-over \$5 million in untendered contracts at eHealth. People like the Courtyard Group and Michael Guerriere-very connected to the Liberal Party; Anzen Consulting; Allaudin Merali and Donna Strating. Here are people who were getting paid in the neighbourhood of \$2,700 a day-\$2,700 a day, and I'm not talking a month, just for the people out there listening or watching this on television. You can't watch it on television in very many places anymore, because the cable companies have pretty well cut us out. Bell ExpressVu doesn't even carry this channel anymore, but they do carry Saskatchewan. So I'm sure there are plenty of Ontario people able to tune in on that.

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But for the 12 people who are watching, that's not \$2,700 a month; that's \$2,700 a day. That's what they were being paid on untendered contracts, and it always seemed that the people who got these contracts had very close connections to the Liberal Party. Coincidence? I hardly think so. But even at that, \$2,700 a day, apparently nobody built in the Timmy's clause. And you know, the Timmy's clause, that's the one that covers you for that dollar-whatever cup of coffee or tea or the mid-afternoon pick-me-up. Choco Bites, was it, or something there?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Choco Bites.

Mr. John Yakabuski: What's that, Coco Bites or chocolate bites?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Choco Bites.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Four dollars, or three-something?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Chocolate-covered ice cream bits.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Oh, chocolate-covered ice cream bits. They're worth a few dollars, but those folks couldn't manage to dip into their own pockets to pay for those. They had to bill the taxpayers here in the province of Ontario.

Flights-what about the big party they held for all these eHealth folks? Remember that, at that convention?

Mrs. Joyce Savoline: In Quebec.

Mr. John Yakabuski: In Quebec City. How much was that?

Interjection.

Mr. John Yakabuski: My goodness gracious, a big party. They're doing such a good job spending almost \$1 billion and getting nothing for it that they figured they better throw them a party for their good work.

So that's the kind of stuff that was going on under the minister's nose. A person using any logic would ask themselves, "Well, who's responsible?" Or, more importantly, who needs to be held responsible for these kinds of misdeeds? Who has got to take the bull by the horns and say, "That one's on me"? Well, logic would dictate that the head of the agency, being the minister, would be the one. Not in McGuinty's Ontario. No, that would be the CEO, Sarah Kramer, who was fired without cause because this minister wouldn't step down and that Premier wouldn't fire him.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I want to thank the members for Toronto-Danforth, Chatham-Kent-Essex, Thunder Bay-Atikokan and Cambridge for their comments or remarks on my comments. I would like to respond briefly to the member from Thunder Bay-Atikokan that, yes, that's exactly what this is: a whitewashing. And the Premier has already shown that he doesn't respect the rulings of officers of this Legislature. When he had an opportunity to do something with the Integrity Commissioner's report on the then Minister of Transportation in 2006, he looked at it, the minister was found in egregious contempt, and do you know what he's basically said? "Thank you, Mr. Integrity Commissioner. I'll be keeping him on. You go back to your offices at Yonge and Bloor, the 21st floor or whatever it is, and I'll let you know if I need you again." That's basically what he said to the Integrity Commissioner.

Why would we expect that this Premier would do anything less, or more, with anything else coming out of the Integrity Commissioner's office, or any other office of this Legislature? Quite frankly, if you want to get to the bottom of this, if you want to be accountable to the people and if you want to be accountable to this Legislature, there is only one proper route to take, and that is to make ministers responsible for their misdeeds. We have ministers on that side of the House who should not be in cabinet because of how they have failed in their responsibility to their ministries and agencies under their ministries. If this Premier wants to show leadership, he can start by sanctioning those ministers and send a message to everybody else in that cabinet that if you step out of line in here, or out there, you're going to be sitting in the back row.