THE FIGHT AGAINST ILLITERACY

ABSTRACT

Early in her senatorial career, Senator Fairbairn became aware of the literacy problems and learning disabilities in Canada and immediately resolved to tackle these issues. Senator Fairbairn calls for a comprehensive and well-funded public policy framework to help alleviate illiteracy problems, which deeply affect other areas of social concern, such as unemployment and healthcare.

As some of you may know, the promotion of literacy has been the cause of my life for nearly two decades. I was driven to it by my own ignorance of a fundamental social and economic fault line which had prevented millions and millions of Canadians from achieving their full potential or, indeed, even being able to dream of it.

When I finally saw the light, my frustration with myself caused me to describe our literacy situation as Canada's hidden shame, and I set out to try to do something about it. I would like to share some of that journey with you now, as it reflects many of the broader literacy challenges we continue to face as our country charts a daunting but exciting course in this new century.

My trek began when I was sworn in as a Senator in the fall of 1984. While committing myself fully to work in the Senate, and actively serving my province and my beloved home territory in the deep southwest corner of Alberta, I was also looking for a cause. That is one of the great things about the Senate – if you want to invest the time and energy, you have an opportunity to take on issues which have fallen through the cracks or been ignored. In my case I did not find literacy – it found me. My very first assignment in the Senate was a special committee on youth.

Those were tough times of high youth unemployment, disillusionment, and even anger and a group of us set out across the country holding public hearings under the leadership of then-Senator Jacques Hebert, an icon in the promotion of youth involvement through Katimavik and Canada World Youth. We heard what we expected about jobs, drugs and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancies, family breakup – but we also heard something we had not anticipated. In every region of Canada, witnesses of all ages spoke out about literacy problems and learning disabilities and their devastating impact on human lives. We were shocked and, in our report, called for a national campaign to tackle these literacy problems. And then we went back to our regular work on other issues.

However, I was haunted by what I had heard and angry with myself that I had been on Parliament Hill through the sixties as a journalist and then worked side by side for 14 years with one of our most education-oriented Prime Ministers, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, and not once had the issue of literacy come up. How could he and I have missed it?

Well, I set out to find the answer in government and on Parliament Hill and discovered I had not missed it – it simply was not there. Literacy had been deemed at some point to be an "education" issue and therefore fell within the jurisdiction of the provinces. Now there is no question education is, and should be, a provincial responsibility. But I believed that literacy went well beyond those boundaries – it was a national imperative. So it became my cause then, now and forever.

Over those years I have trudged across the country (Ancient Mariner) attending countless meetings with our army of volunteers and learners – from large cities to small villages; in community halls and church basements; and on inner city streets or in hidden rooms where no one else could see or hear.

We have button-holed politicians of every stripe – both federally, provincially and municipally, and encouraged, and cajoled, and challenged our corporate leaders. In 1987 out of sheer frustration I launched a debate in the Senate about literacy in Canada. It was the first ever in either House of Parliament which says a lot about where the issue stood at that time.

It has often been a lonely road filled with the frustration of trying to articulate and advocate for an issue that so many Canadians in politics and business and industry and even society in general often view with skepticism and disbelief. Often I was accused of lying. Indeed, it took a landmark international study in 1995 by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), aided by Statistics Canada, that sent shock waves through levels of government and educators across the country. Among a group of 13 of our industrial trading partners we ranked somewhere in the middle below European countries led by Sweden and slightly above the United States.

There were four levels of measurement and, although we did well at the very top of the scale, of great concern was the 20 per cent at the very lowest level – very close to the word we try never to use, "illiteracy" – and another

SENATOR JOYCE FAIRBAIN

Senator Fairbain was appointed to the Senate on June 29, 1984. She has held the positions of Vice-Chair of the National and Western Liberal Caucus (1984-1990) and Co-Chair of the Liberal Party of Canada Election Readiness Committee (June 1991). And in 1993 she was appointed to the Cabinet, as the first woman Leader of the Government in the Senate.

22 per cent at the second level who are only able to read material which is very simple and clearly laid out – everyday tasks that most of us in this room would take for granted.

My message has been simple: literacy IS the foundation for every thing we learn and do – how we are able to function in the routine tasks of daily life – at home, at work, at school, within the family. And, if that is true, we cannot – we must not – ignore some 8 million Canadians, over 40% of our adult population – the 20 plus 22 percent I was just talking about – who currently find themselves marginalized because of inadequate literacy and numeracy skills – and who therefore are at risk of being unable to fully and meaningfully contribute to and participate in our national life.

In recent years we have tended to view literacy from two perspectives. The first is Workplace Literacy, meaning the basic skills needed to enjoy meaningful employment and advancement and opportunity in the high tech world of the 21st century. And the second perspective is Family Literacy, or the many ways families together develop and use literacy skills such as reading, writing, and numeracy to accomplish day-to-day tasks and duties.

The workplace connection is not hard to understand – inadequate literacy skills inhibit job promotion, income potential, and even health and safety. When those of us who view our own literacy level as high struggle through the numerous manuals and instruction books now necessary in today's work arena – and I know I do – how difficult must it be for those workers who have reading problems to start with?

Happily, the vital need for special initiatives in the workplace is now being grasped by governments and many employers - it affects not only their bottom line, but also the morale and well being of their staff.

However, the second perspective – that family literacy connection – has been much more difficult to sell. It has been very interesting and sometimes agonizing to watch the determination and courage in the manner in which that family message has come up from individuals, parents and groups, on the ground in communities all across the land, and NOT down from governments.

Perhaps it rattles government because it is so personal and tough to tackle, and blanket solutions do not really work. One size never fits all in family situations, and I give our current government and provincial partners credit for the joint efforts they have made over the past few years to reach out creatively – with resources – and work with literacy practitioners and individuals to touch the right chord.

That family challenge remains at the heart of our problems and a key part of the reason that our very perception of literacy is being revised to take into account the different pressures and expectations of the 21st century.

In our labor- intensive economy of the past, millions of Canadians were able to compensate for their lack of reading and writing skills. They developed a circle of support, usually within their own family, to the point where, for many, their problems with literacy were not really a major factor in their daily lives. With great skill and courage they learned to work around literacy issues – AND, also, manual skills were in constant demand and provided decent wages.

Today, however, with the advent of new technologies, the information age, a knowledge-based economy, and a vastly diverse workforce, literacy has become a prerequisite to almost every aspect of our lives – no matter what our age or occupation. It lurks everywhere – whether you can use a banking machine, or take an eye examination; try to read the candidate's names in order to mark an X on a line on a ballot; order a meal in a restaurant, find a number in a phone book, fill out a job application.

It confronts millions of Canadians in our towns and cities who travel on the bus or subway by counting the number of stops on their fingers because they cannot read the signs; or who shop at the local supermarket or corner store by memorizing the colour and size and shape and position of goods on shelves because they cannot read the labels.

In today's workplace, demands are driven by technology that knows no boundaries. It affects production line workers, farmers, executives, truck drivers, trades people, office workers, sales clerks, and even the staff at your local fast food outlet.

In Canada, as more and more "baby boomers" retire, and as the birth rate drops, we no longer enjoy the luxury of a continuously growing workforce. For some time yet, we will still be counting on those who are working now to face the challenge of adapting quickly to the use of information technology we could not even have imagined ten years ago. In fact, 70 per cent of the technology used today had not even been created five years ago. Yet up to 25% of today's students have problems reading and writing and some 30 per cent drop out of high school each year. A recent report by the Canadian Council on Social Development, which compared Canada to other developed countries, noted that we have the third largest population of young people with poor literacy skills. That is totally unacceptable.

All this has placed added pressure on parents who themselves have problems with basic literacy skills in their own daily lives and are desperately trying to reach higher, farther and faster to maintain a living. The strain on families is profound. Just think of the risk and the fear of not being able to understand materials distributed by health care providers, or misreading medical dosages or nutrition labels on food, or instructions on a package of baby formula. The results can be disastrous – accidental poisoning, or illness which can increase a child's chance of developing learning and behavioral problems.

We know that lower literacy skills invariably result in below average incomes. In turn, low income Canadians are prone to have more accidents, suffer a wide range of diseases and die earlier. Without question this inflates our healthcare costs.We must persuade our decision makers that a literate workforce will have positive impacts on children as well. Clearly, tomorrow's skilled workforce will be found in today's families.

And we have learned through the federal government's marvelous agency, the National Literacy Secretariat, that money spent on literacy is an investment that can repay itself ten fold in lower health care costs, savings for our social programs, increased international competitiveness, and savings in our justice system.

For me, one of our saddest statistics is that some 1.6 million Canadians over the age of 65 are rated at the lowest level for literacy. Simply stated, that means that these seniors have difficulty reading at all.

How do they come to grips with the increased use of self-medication; or with health and social services where

communications are increasingly impersonal and automated; or with mobility restrictions that can lead to loss of friends, personal contacts, and plain old conversation. They cannot even enjoy a good book as a friend. Society may think that literacy is less important to our elderly population. After all – the theory goes – they are generally retired – their productive days behind them. Well, this attitude totally ignores the fact that seniors – next to health – prize independence beyond almost anything else, and independence demands literacy.

And, when talking about the devastating effects of illiteracy, we cannot but alarmingly stress the link between literacy and crime. The statistics are appalling. Up to 50 per cent of adult inmates can neither read nor write and this can rise to over 80% in institutions with a high aboriginal population, particularly in Western Canada. Over 75% of juvenile offenders have learning disabilities and in some areas it rises to 90%. Up to 90% of adult inmates are school dropouts.

The vast majority of offenders will eventually be released from prison and return to our communities. Without doubt, concentrated literacy programs while incarcerated will help them re-enter the workplace and their communities.

And, finally, I cannot appeal to you and discuss this issue without offering a fervent plea to understand the importance Canadians must place on the inclusion of our aboriginal people in this life long process. Let there be no doubt that literacy and education are at the heart of opportunity for the first citizens in every part of our country, so that they can have equal access to the benefits of this wonderful land which they cared for and protected long before any of our ancestors set foot on what is now Canada. While this is a stated priority for all our governments, we must hold them accountable for a far greater effort, particularly with the children who will lead the future of our first nations.

Without question we have come a long way in Canada over the past two decades. Governments at all levels, along with business, labor, educators and the literacy movement and our volunteer sector are working ever closer together pooling resources for broader results. Over the last two years hundreds of Canadians from all walks of life, myself included, have been crafting what has become known as the national skills and learning initiative. There have been meetings and town halls and consultations from coast to coast to coast, ending in a Summit on Innovation and Learning held in Toronto last fall.

A key driver of this initiative is the Honourable Jane Stewart, Minister of Human Resource Development and a long time friend of the literacy movement. Not only has she championed our advances in early childhood development, but last spring she asked members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources to determine from a Parliamentary perspective, what they felt could and should be done about literacy in Canada.

It was the first time in Canadian Parliamentary history that a House of Commons Committee had focused in on the literacy issue and its thoughtful report was tabled in the House of Commons on June 12th. It draws attention to Canada's low literacy rates, expresses concern over the current lack of resources and public policy framework necessary to address the literacy challenge, and calls on all governments – federal, provincial, territorial – to take action on a national literacy strategy.

These call for action range from urging the federal government to take the lead on negotiating a pan-Canadian literacy Accord with the provinces and territories, to developing an Aboriginal Literacy Strategy, to cataloguing a variety of ways the federal government can invest in and support literacy with the literacy community and on its own.

Recently, Jane tabled the official government response to this groundbreaking effort in the House of Commons. In it, the Government agrees with the thrust and spirit of the Committee's recommendations. It says that raising adult literacy skills requires a pan-Canadian response, built on multi-level partnerships and that the Government of Canada is taking a leadership role in fostering that concerted effort. This response, along with all the feedback, insights and suggestions from our cross-Canada consultations, will be central to drafting a National Literacy Strategy and an action plan aimed at the budget process of next February.

And even though we are in a period of transition in federal politics, I hope and believe that this issue and the resources required for meaningful implementation will find a welcome home on the agenda of the next government. I certainly intend to fight like a mother with a cub to keep it there.

It is crystal clear that we, as a country, must consolidate a culture based on life-long learning. And we must be careful how we define it – it does not just pop up in transition from school to the workplace or in up-grading to a new job level. Lifelong learning starts at the beginning when the smallest child can feel a book, turn a page, recognize a picture and hear the sounds of reading from a friendly voice within the security of a pair of arms – and it keeps on going through school and work and families – right to the very end of our lives.

Without that span we isolate a huge segment of Canadian society and undervalue the contribution it has the potential to make to our country. With our small population and in terms of human decency and compassion, we simply cannot afford to leave anyone behind. I have moved from earlier days of fighting for this cause on the basis of social justice or economic necessity, to a stubborn insistence that literacy is a right and a responsibility of citizenship for every individual in Canada – wherever they live, whatever their age or circumstance. I have talked in every corner of this land about the necessity of giving each and every Canadian a fair chance to participate, and contribute and have a job and make a decent wage and build a strong and vigorous life for themselves and their children.

This is not about special treatment. It is not about privilege. It is about glorying in acquiring knowledge that not only puts bread on the table, but entertains and comforts and enhances the soul. That is not idle rhetoric. And lifelong learning is not just a slogan: it IS a cultural necessity for this nation. And I am telling you today, with all the heart and soul I can muster that, however long or frustrating the journey may be, however rough the challenges, our spirit and determination must not fail because we are talking about nothing less than the future of our children and the success of our country which I believe to be the finest in the world.