

HEADLINE: Round Table on Creating a More Efficient Labour Market in Canada Hosted by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards: Session 4 on Improving the Effectiveness of the Apprenticeship System in Canada

PRINCIPAL: Ken Georgetti, President, Canadian Labour Congress

Moderator: Our final session is on improving the effectiveness of the apprenticeship system in Canada and I think this follows from our earlier session on immigration because often we've used immigrants as a source of skilled labour in Canada because we weren't producing enough supply of them. So we have four lead speakers in this session and all of them are very, very knowledgeable about the apprenticeship system. And we're particularly honoured that our first lead speaker is Ken Georgetti, who is President of the Canadian Labour Congress and as you'll see from his bio, has had training as an apprenticeship in British Columbia. So he really has firsthand experience with Canada's apprenticeship system so I think his comments will be particularly à propos to the debate on apprenticeship. Ken, I'd like to turn it over to you.

Ken Georgetti: Thank you Andrew and thank you for inviting me. I guess our central message is that although I don't wish it, I don't think any of us wish it, but we may not really be that far away from seeing the consequence of our collective failure to deal effectively and efficiently with the apprenticeship programs. The consequences I think will be seen in terms of lost opportunities. As we already know there's a need and a demand for skilled workers that will increase exponentially in the next few years that current rates of enrollment and of completion in existing apprenticeship programs will not allow us to meet.

First of all, you have to be employed to be an apprentice. You can't be an apprentice without an employer. In other words, if we're serious about apprenticeship, you need a legal framework, a public policy framework or something that creates an obligation, let's say a duty for employers to take apprentices and see them through their training, from beginning to completion. Duty does not mean burden or public policy or legal framework. It means government involvement with political will and public funding.

Let me give you some facts and figures and comments. Enrollment in programs and trends — the trends have been downward for over a decade. Completion rate — only 10% of those who enroll today actually complete their program and we have to ask why that is. First of all I think educators and school administrators and civil servants and others often channel the wrong people to these programs. The least academically gifted usually get referred; if you can't make it to university or college, maybe take an apprenticeship. And these apprenticeship programs demand qualifications, both academically and as well sound work habits.

The other problem that we see in the trends is that employers don't have to keep their apprentices. They often hire them when a short-term need arises and release them after one or two years. And newcomers in the programs we see are more likely to find placement in apprenticeships than displaced apprentices in their third or fourth year of training and we think that's because they probably cost more. As well, when the economic cycle changes downward, employers always release their apprentices first. They have no legal, they have no education or social duty to keep them, nor any economic incentive, at least short term, to keep them on in their training programs as well.

In the building and construction trades today, the average age is over 48, almost 49. That means over the next decade there'll be a massive turnover in those fields and what's happening in the construction area is that apprenticeships are down 26% just in the building trades since 1991. Apprenticeships are down 21% in the electrical and electronic trades since 1991 in Canada. Apprenticeships are down not just because of industry cycles but because of actual government policies that throw obstacles and discourage employers and young people from taking apprenticeships. Tuition fees to vocational institutes have doubled in the last decade in Canada, even though there have been some exceptions or freezes in Quebec, in B.C., and to a lesser degree in Saskatchewan. That alone may explain why attendance at vocational institutes is down everywhere.

Devolution to the provinces in terms of responsibility for training make it difficult, very difficult now, to keep standards, curriculums and certifications across jurisdictions even and consistent. At least from our data and surveys, Canadians do expect their national government and parliament to make it easier for them to fill the demands that exist in the current job markets and to master the skills that we see will be in demand tomorrow.

Now I must say I know from statistics again that only 34% of graduates from high school enter universities or colleges. The other 66% don't and we see again among young people a pretty high unemployment rate. Working families view with alarming suspicion proposals for tax exempt registered savings plan for education and training. First of all, only those with enough money will be able to afford training or higher education. But even before that, with the rate of unemployment among young people, where do they come up with the income of some sort to even consider training or higher education. What do we do with the large number of young people that are not even in the job market? A registered training and saving plan is not something that they view as being positive for them.

I back the argument that we do have a savings plan that should be used for training, and it's called EI. There should be provisions for training leave in the unemployment -- or the employment insurance system. Apprentices use EI right now when they're at school in their vocational training and it's been that way for

about 40 years. The federal government as well used to pay for the two-week waiting period out of general revenue for apprentices while they were in vocational school. They've discontinued that since the EI legislation came in and we hear from apprentices that that is very burdensome on them. Going two weeks without wages in order to learn an occupation is very difficult while you're trying to work and support a family and the rest. The EI system can be and should be for the purposes of training and granting those kind of leaves. I don't think we need another registered savings plan of sorts that somehow will be the panacea that will cure the notion of training.

A registered savings plan won't alleviate, for example, the current or expected shortages of qualified workers in nursing. We're told that we'll need 113,000 nurses over the next three years. Health sciences, technology, the building and construction trades, many government services, manufacturing and retail, are not going to be helped. Unemployment insurance, I must say candidly, is no help anymore in that regard. Should be but isn't. Our congress has called for and we participated in the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum. It's up and running but we need political will now to make it work.

Again, in terms of our information, in 1998 the OECD published standards and by international standards our country is doing well with regard to university and college level education. In fact we're in the top quartile in training. However, with regard to apprenticeship and other forms of organized, industrial based training, Canada does not compare well with the OECD. There's a general lack, I must say, of support for workplace training from employers. It's evident in their low level of participation. This is matched by a general public disinterest in trade and vocational training..

I can say anecdotally that in my current job, many times I fill out forms and where it says post-secondary education, for the longest time I put "none" until someone corrected me and said you do have post-secondary education, it's called apprenticeship. But it's not something parents want their children to aspire to because we've talked about this new economy and all this rhetoric about the so-called new economy. Training is almost always about university and college education and the so-called new economy is always the centre of attention and I notice that parents are inclined to encourage their children's aspirations to study at universities rather than to achieve a technical diploma or license. Therefore the normal economy as I refer to it, which I might add still employs 70 to 75% of Canadians, suffers and is ignored because that's not really an achievement anymore. So I think that we have a very strong and very good opportunity to collaborate to work towards a new culture for training and skill building inside the Canadian economy that will put a lot of people into family supporting jobs that will be not only good for the economy but good for those people. Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you very much Ken.