

HANSARD – March 18, 2014

LATE SHOW DEBATE

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Julia Munro): The member for Perth–Wellington has given notice of his dissatisfaction with the answer to a question given yesterday by the Minister of Agriculture. The member has up to five minutes in which to debate the matter, and the parliamentary assistant has up to five minutes to respond.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Yesterday, I had a question for the Premier and Minister of Agriculture and Food. Her answer was not satisfactory to me and was not satisfactory to horse breeders or others in the industry.

I will read my question into the record: “Why should it take a lawsuit to force you and the NDP to pay attention?”

In the supplementary, I discussed our call for an immediate and permanent end to the government’s so-called modernization plan that would build 29 new casinos while putting even more of the horse racing industry out of business. I stated that we would also establish a workable, transparent and affordable Slots at Racetracks Program. I asked the Premier, “Why won’t you?”

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In her response, the Premier claimed that her record on horse racing is “very, very successful.” Her claim is laughable, especially since she herself has already admitted that her government’s decision to end the Slots at Racetracks Program was a mistake.

But the Premier’s response also raises an important question: If her record on horse racing is so successful, why is the province now facing a potential lawsuit?

I have been speaking with leaders in the industry, who tell me that the Premier’s spin is completely out of touch with reality. Just this morning, I spoke to a representative of the Standardbred Breeders of Ontario Association who is extremely concerned about what the Premier said. She tells me that she has watched countless question periods and feels that it’s always the same rhetoric being spewed. As she points out, the Premier’s typical response always focuses on racetracks. She needs to know, however, that the industry is more than just a racetrack.

The breeding industry is incredibly important because it provides the horse supply. Many breeders feel ignored by this government. Given what the Liberals have put them through, it's no wonder. That is why we're here tonight.

I asked the Premier why it took a lawsuit for her and the NDP to focus on this issue. Because of her mismanagement of this file, we can now expect staggering legal costs to defend the OLG and the province.

This didn't have to happen. I understand that the standardbred breeders sent this government a tolling agreement so that the discussion could take place and, hopefully, result in a resolution without the risk of losing their legal rights as the March 12 litigation deadline was quickly approaching. I'm told that the government refused to sign this tolling agreement. Standardbred breeders have been asking for a discussion on compensation for the last two years for the real losses they have sustained due to the government's cancellation of SARP. The breeders want to work with the government to establish a plan to rebuild the breeding sector, but obviously the government didn't want to work with them.

Breeders have specifically stated they did not want to litigate. However, the government ignored their requests and left them no choice. They now feel that they have no other way to preserve their rights. The government still has every opportunity to go back to the negotiating table and resolve this with the horse breeders.

Why did they refuse a tolling agreement when they had the chance? When will they and their partners, the NDP, ever take responsibility for the chaos they have created in this industry? We need to hear some credible answers without excuses and without delay.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Julia Munro): The parliamentary assistant has up to five minutes to respond.

Mr. Grant Crack: I'd like to thank the member from—help me.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Perth–Wellington.

Mr. Grant Crack: Perth–Wellington; I should have known that based on the fact that they had a wonderful plowing match there last year. I'd like to thank him for his advocacy on this.

I'd like to start off by just mentioning that he did make reference to an issue that was before the courts, so it would be inappropriate for me as a member of the government to speak to that at this particular point.

But I'd just like to bring to his attention and remind everyone that, in the past, there has been over \$440 million going into the horse racing industry. We as a government realized the importance of making sure every dollar that's being spent can be accounted for in a very

transparent manner, so we made some decisions a year and a half ago concerning how we were going to move forward with the SARP, the Slots at Racetracks Program. We made notification that that particular program, as it exists, would be terminated.

What we did as a government is, we created the Horse Racing Industry Transition Panel. We appointed three very respectful former members of this House: John Snobelen, Elmer Buchanan and John Wilkinson. They reached out to all the stakeholders in the horse racing industry, and I think that that they came back with some very strong recommendations to the government on how we could move forward in a very accountable and a very transparent way.

I can tell you that the Premier, in the last year, has taken very, very strong action in order to give the industry that long-term stability that is so required when public funds are involved. What we've done is we're working towards stabilizing the industry, and we have a comprehensive plan that builds on a solid foundation and a new partnership with the industry.

What we're going to do is we're going to use that plan and we're going to try to encourage the industry to grow its revenues, grow its future, by enhancing its fan base and growing wagering revenues.

We committed to \$400 million over the next five years—that's \$80 million a year—to stabilize the industry. The partnership that we're going to continue with the horse racing industry will support an economically sound and commercially viable model of world-class standardbred, thoroughbred and quarter-horse racing.

The Slots at Racetracks Program focused on the horse racing industry—not on the horse racing industry, but on the slot machines as well. It's clear that in order to move forward, we have to have more of the focus on the actual horse racing industry.

Our partnership plan reintegrates racing with the Ontario gaming strategy by providing new opportunities for the racing industry. We're also working to integrate horse racing into the Ontario lottery and gaming commission's modernization plan.

To support the horse racing industry, the OLG will share its business, marketing and responsible gaming expertise. We're going to work with the industry to market the horse racing industry and enhance the on-track experience. We're going to research potential new horse-themed lottery products to promote the integration of gaming and horse racing, and generate additional revenue. We're going to optimize the use of racetrack infrastructure as multi-gaming sites.

Madam Speaker, we are committed to this industry. It has been a difficult year and a half or two years, but it's the right way forward.

The opposition will continue to advocate for a return to that same old program. That's not going to happen. That was not transparent; that was not accountable. As a government, the onus is on us to make sure that as we move forward, all our partners are transparent and responsible.

To conclude, I would just like to say that there have been a number of agreements reached with tracks across the province, and we will continue to work. I look forward to very shortly seeing something that comes to fruition, which would be an agreement with the Rideau Carleton Raceway in the very near future, as many stakeholders from eastern Ontario and in my riding of Glengarry–Prescott–Russell thoroughly enjoy the Rideau Carleton Raceway.